FANTASTIC

AUGUST

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

SWORD OF FLOWERS
by Larry Harris

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MAC 8

THE TITAN
by P. Schuyler Miller

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FANTASTIC
STORIES OF IMAGINATION

AUGUST 1962
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Illustrating *Sword of Flowers*

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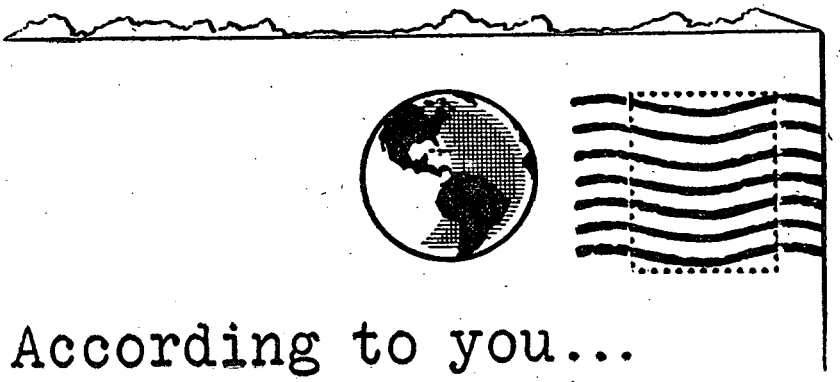

According to you...

Dear Editor:

I've just finished reading your May issue of FANTASTIC. The cover story, Leinster's "Planet of Dread" was the best, of course! And the Schelling cover, though not as good as the one he did for the May AMAZING, was certainly a treat. He (Schelling) is very original in his style, and I've never seen anything like his before in all my seven years as an sf fan. I would have nominated him for the Hugo for the best sf artist, but it seems I'm too late.

All of the other stories were good, though there was nothing really special about most of them. "The Piebald Hippogriff" by Karen Anderson was a delightful fantasy—more like it, please! About the story by David R. Bunch: ("The Survey Trip") I have nothing to say. I can take Bunch or leave him, preferably leave him, though; the violent controversy, however, I will stay out of.

I'm looking forward to your next month's issue, especially the Robert F. Young story (always one of my favorite writers for FANTASTIC) and especially Robert Bloch. I've been begging for over a year to see one of his stories in your mag. and I'm glad you finally got one, even if it is a reprint. What's with Bloch? Has he abandoned science fiction?

Bob Adolfsen
9 Prospect Ave.
Sea Cliff, N.Y.

● *Bloch is busy-busy writing movie and TV scripts and prize mysteries and huddling with his tax accountants.*

Dear Editor:

I'm still laughing. Both at the Bunch story and at the fans who

(Continued on page 127)

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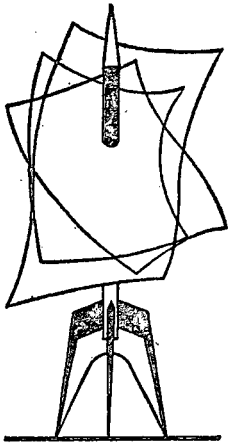

EDITORIAL

NEVER underestimate the ingenuity of a space scientist. Or, to paraphrase the old adage, if the Earthman can't go to the planet, let's bring the planet to the Earthman. Or—well, enough of this brilliant writing. The fact that stimulated all this is that the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at Caltech has a miniature Venus on its grounds for experimental purposes only.

Venus exists in an environmental simulator —a silo-shaped tank about 80 feet high and 27 feet in diameter—which has, to put it briefly, been drained of air and filled with sunshine. Various pumping and compressing machines have created a near-vacuum (the simulator can create an atmosphere with one-billionth of the pressure at Earth sea level). And a special lighting system comes as close as possible to duplicating the effect of sunlight as it exists in space.

By experimenting with this synthetic Venus environment, scientists hope to learn more about the actual planet, and perhaps come up with more practical solutions for terra-forming it.

* * *

No knowledge ever becomes entirely outdated. An American company that specializes in designing spacesuits is doing research, in the Tower of London, on a suit of armor worn by England's 16th century monarch, King Henry VIII. Reason: to learn how armorers managed to create such perfectly articulated joints that not only completely covered the wearer, but at the same time permitted him a full measure of freedom of movement.

* * *

The laser, as most of you know, is a powerful, narrow-focus beam of light. Much of the talk about mysterious "death rays" may actually be referring to top-secret experimentation with this kind of light beam. Not long ago, General Electric announced that a laser had neatly and easily sliced in two a diamond—the hardest substance known to man. The impact, it was reported, created an explosion and a blue-white jet flame. So the "death ray" business may be on the level after all. Man, as I remember, is much softer than diamonds.

N. L.

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Sword of Flowers

He made her a Queen. It was logical, then,

that she should make him a slave.

THE name of the world was Marda—remember?

It was a good world, Marda, a fine world. There were three major continents (and you recall the names, don't you? You remember Kennecevres, and Rim, and Dnadarue—of course you do)—and most of the world was ocean. That ocean, which held the three continents in the deep cups of its hands, was sweet-smelling, rose-colored, full of light to the depths. (It was the fish, of course, the shining fish that flooded the ocean with their light. And men and women studied the fish: they were called scientists, but their science was not like the science we now imagine: they became the fish, they shared the mind and being of these shining creatures for hours or days at a time: it was called "knowing by knowing," and all living things, except only the men and women themselves, were studied in that way.)

The land was filled with groves of pleasant trees, with green grass softer to the touch than a feather's edge, with flowers of many colors. Some of these were blue with white centers, others white with centers of yellow. You cannot have forgotten the flowers?

There were no cities and no buildings. What need had the people of singing Kennecevres, of sickle-shaped Rim, of Dnadarue at the top of the world, for shelter? The grass was soft, the climate warm, and soft rain did not disturb these people: the rain, too, was warm, and the rain was also a living thing which could be known by knowing.

Yet Marda (remember!) was no world of perfection: it has never been found that perfection has existence. For on that world was a girl who was named Dorrae, and a man called Rafel, and another man, a man of talent and intelligence, one Ferrico. The words are correct, the words *man* and *girl*. Those are the right words.

It is hard to remember, but memory will come to you soon,

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By LARRY M. HARRIS

Illustrator SUMMERS

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Very soon you will recall.

THE story which it is necessary to tell begins with Dorrae, and perhaps the true beginning is with her birth, though we need hardly go back so far. For she was born as the others were born, taught and trained in the same manner, and by the same methods, as all the others, in the very greenest center of green Kennecevres, where the centaurs cried and sang, where the clouds overhead hung like Summer's promises, where the flowers (blue, with the white centers: white, with the yellow centers) sprang from the tufted ground like praise. And with the others she learned speech and motion, with all the others she learned rule and custom.

Yet Dorrae possessed a difference, and it lay in this: that from the day she opened her eyes to experience she knew, also, the great worth which all others believed that she had. For there was none like her in all that land, none so beautiful, none with so striking a face, so grave and graceful a voice, such smooth darkness of skin, her eyes black as coals and her hair black as night. From her birth she moved as a dancer moves, with that trained economy which is beyond calculation, and her glance had in it a shining depth of directness. As admiration for her began to swell pride added light to that depth, and the lift of her head became more beautiful, more pronounced.

And she grew into praise, as a tree grows into the mold which forces it to cup-shape, to statue-shape. The years circled slowly over her head, and as each passed she became more admirable, until at last in all of Kennecevres men looked to her, and dreamed, and despaired.

For her pride grew with her grace and gravity, with her beauty and light. And she would have none of the men, she would speak to none, walk with none. She was herself and kept to herself: she was Dorrae and there was none like her. Perhaps pride was her reason for this, and perhaps the reason was fear, but no reason is certain, for a person cannot be known as other things are known: a person must be considered and guessed at, a person must at last simply be accepted.

Dorrae could never learn to accept or to give: her gift was herself, and it was too valuable for any man. So glances followed her through the long green days of singing Kennecevres, and, being Dorrae, she lived alone. She lived on the fruits of that land, and slept on its soft grass, and perhaps she waited for some more perfect man than any she had known or

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could imagine, and perhaps she waited only for praise. But another waited, a young man who was called Rafel.

Now Rafel was filled with no desire but the desire for Dorrae. Others wanted her, but as they wanted a special fruit or a particular song: Rafel desired her as if she were the sun, without which there is no life. Of Dorrae, and of her alone, he spoke, and soon there were few to listen to him, and at last only one, a quick man whose face twisted with disappointment and knowledge, a patient man who weighed all he heard and stored it and never showed the use of a single word of it to any but himself. And this was Ferrico.

THEY lay, in the setting sun, on the soft grass, two of them alone while the colors of that world dimmed, and Ferrico said in a voice as flat as metal: "She will not have you, boy."

"Then I shall have nothing at all," Rafel said, his own voice mild. "There is nothing else in all this world, without her. Without Dorrae." His voice, saying her name, was like the wind blowing across a small flower.

"Nothing, without one single person," Ferrico said, and his voice was a slap in the air. He was a bent, heavy man with a broad nose, and his ideas were his alone: what he dreamed had never existed. He carried always a sword in a scabbard red as blood, a sword he had never used and for which there was, in that land, no use at all: he had thought it into growth (for that, too, was a talent in the world of Marda—as you must recall). He had named it, for none had ever existed before: he was never without it. Now his fingers felt the hilt and the scabbard. "Is there a person that important? Is there a person who outbalances the world?"

"There is," Rafel said quietly.

Ferrico shook his head, his long hair falling about his eyes. "I, too, have watched her," he said. "She is a woman, no more than that."

"She is Dorrae." Once more the wind, caressing the flower.

"And what, then, is Dorrae?" Ferrico asked him sharply. "One among many, born to live and to die, an ant among other ants . . ."

His voice trailed away. Savagely he turned and pulled at a handful of the soft grass. Rafel stirred with discomfort, watching him, and found words: "Then all is worthless," he said. "If a human being is worth so little—for what would you struggle, bent one?"

Ferrico's laugh was like the infrequent mutter of thunder. "To be more than an ant," he said. "To be . . ." And again he stopped. At last he said: "More."

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"More," Rafel said slowly. "Now, here is a strange ambition, bent one. Is there some virtue in the piling up of quantities —some shining wonder in arithmetic?"

Ferrico's fist tightened about the grass. "Why," he said, almost smoothly, "Dorrae is different from others, for all men look to her. And you are different, young Rafel, for you look to nothing else. And so am I different." Again his laugh muttered, He opened his hand and the grass lay in his palm, crushed and damp. "For I look to Ferrico, and to nothing but Ferrico," he said. "I am born into a world which has no use for me, Rafel, a world where I must sit and wait and think thoughts wanted by none. I am—" He paused—"a stone, born to grind stone. And there is nothing in this world harder than the soft grass." The damp stuff dropped forgotten from his palm.

"And so you think and plan," Rafel said. "Yet when someone wants your planning—"

"It is not wanted," Ferrico said. He paused, waiting.

"If I could plan to have Dorrae —"

"You, young one?" Ferrico's mouth twisted: he rolled back to face the other, eyes suddenly burning. "Yet," he said slowly, "there is a chance—"

"A chance?"

Ferrico took a breath. "I will help you," he said.

"You cannot," Rafel said, and frowned. "There is no help to be given. Such matters as this are not for planning."

"I am a stone born to grind stone," Ferrico said, in a voice without echo. "There is your help: believe in it. Wait and watch. There is a chance, and more than a chance." He sat up awkwardly.

But Rafel still frowned. "Why?" he asked.

Now Ferrico raised himself to stand straight-legged upon the grass, and looked out into the distance, out into the setting sun. "To be more than an ant," he said.

AND so Ferrico began to speak with Dorrae. This, he explained to the eager Rafel, was the first step and must be borne in patience: and Rafel believed, and waited, thinking there was no other chance for him and willing to trust Ferrico, since trust was easy in that world.

Dorrae allowed the quick man speech, perhaps out of wonder: of all in that land he had shown her, until this time, the least interest. And she knew him to be ugly and gross, sharp and savage: he was not, could not be, any part of her choice, should she ever choose any man. Also, he spoke well, weaving about her a web of in-

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terest and strangeness: so she listened.

He spoke at first of familiar things, making them strange only by a twist of view, an oddity of interpretation, and she found herself agreeing with what he said: it was new, it was exciting, and truth hardly mattered in such small and unimportant matters as those he chose for her. It was some days before he began to invent new and unreal matters, as he had invented his sword, and bring these matters to growth within her mind.

There were new words for new things: he taught her the word *Queen,* and she heard him and approved, for was she not truly a Queen, beloved by all, gazed at by all and yet set above the ones who gazed, since she would have none of them? Ferrico spoke thus, and she believed and learned.

He spun long tales of other Queens, and battles and deaths for their sakes, and all the names were strange and new, and the stories invented, unreal, impossible in that world: yet, somehow, she began to feel that all of the stories were to happen soon, and all of the names her own. He said to her: "Think of a palace."

And she tried this word on her tongue, expectant of marvels. "Palace?"

Ferrico described a palace, something which could not, did not, never might exist on the world of Marda, where shelter, unneeded, was unknown: but he could imagine a structure, and call it by a name.

"What good is such a place?" Dorrae asked when he had finished.

Ferrico spoke very smoothly, explaining just as if all he told her were true and existent. "In a palace, the Queen is set apart," he said, "so that all may know that she is Queen. In a palace she is surrounded only by those things which make her beauty more, and attract all eyes to her."

Dorrae's black eyes looked inward at her own thoughts, and her voice was distant. "It is not needed," she said.

Ferrico spoke to those thoughts, softly, easily, as he had planned. "Yet here," he said, "there is land and sky. Men look at such things. In a palace, all is meant to draw attention to the Queen and to the Queen alone. Her praise is greater, her admiration more intense."

And Dorrae said again: "It is not needed," but her voice, more distant, was less sure.

Ferrico nodded and continued smoothly, his voice weaving a continuous spell about the mind of Dorrae, so that more and more she thought of herself as the Queen of that land, and wondered at it. And then she ceased to wonder, for the thought had become part of her life.

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He spoke, also, to Rafel, and kept the young man calm: "Without me you have no chance," he said. "This is my help."

"Yet you see her, you speak to her, and I do not."

"It is your chance," Ferrico said. "Believe me. Trust me."

And time passed while Ferrico spoke, inventing one word after another, filling the mind of Dorrae, which pride had made ready, with all of this novelty. And the men of Kennecevres watched and did nothing, for if Dorrae herself were strange and new then all could expect from her only strange acts, new acts. And the women of Kennecevres watched, and the women waited.

Time passed.

WHAT is a slave?" Dorrae asked. "Is it like a palace? Like a jewel?" Her black eyes shone brighter now. She wore shells which sparkled, she wore a necklace of flowers and a pendant which was one great red stone the color of Ferrico's own scabbard; she wore ear-rings of green stones that brightened in the sunlight. "You have always something new for me," she said, "and it pleases me to hear you."

"A slave is the power of a Queen," Ferrico said carefully.

"Power?' Dorrae asked. "What need have I of power? I am Queen, and all know this. What more is needed?"

"Power is the largest jewel of all," Ferrico said, watching her face. "Power is the Queen saying that she is Queen. It is by power that others know the Queen lives. It is by power that she maintains her own life."

"And yet all know me," Dorrae said. "There is no need."

"They shall know you better," Ferrico said, and he explained the nature of a slave. It took a long time before Dorrae saw the picture he drew, and then she spoke at once:

"None would be willing."

"One shall be willing," Ferrico told her, and went to find the slave of the Queen. There was one, after all, who could be persuaded, one who would see at last his first chance.

And Ferrico laughed, for none were so quick as he in that world. Dorrae, hearing his laugh, stood and wondered, fingering the pendant of red he had shown her how to wear.

AND Rafel heard Ferrico's argument, and was persuaded his chance had come, and became the slave of Dorrae, for in this way he might be close to her and serve her, and this was a part of his desire, the first part to be fulfilled.

And the men of Kennecevres began less urgently to watch Dorrae: she had grown too far from their lives, in her pride and

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in her novelty, and she walked in a world they could not enter, so that even her beauty began to seem less important and less worth the watching. And the women, who had become fearful —for none knew what such a one as Dorrae might chose to do, to themselves or to their men—saw with Rafel and with Ferrico, and their fear dissolved like mist. And Ferrico said:

"You must give orders."

"I give orders to Rafel," Dorrae said. "I tell him to come and to go, to walk and to stand, to bring me what I choose. He obeys the orders: this is what is meant by *slave*."

"But the others must be ordered," Ferrico said.

"The others are not slaves."

Ferrico nodded as if he listened to her. "Yet they may become so," he said. "If you choose."

"They are not willing," Dorrae said.

"For the Queen—"

And it was this conversation which Rafel interrupted, this moment he broke apart with his entrance.

His voice was a sudden hush in the room: "All?"

Ferrico, perhaps, realized at this moment that he had moved too quickly. He turned and made his face smile. "We are creating stories," he said. "These things have no existence."

Dorrae frowned. "But you say to me I should—"

"It is not important," Ferrico told her quickly.

"Let me hear." Rafel's voice was still quiet. He looked at the woman, and at the bent man, and waited through a silence. "All should be slaves to—to the Queen. All should take her orders."

Dorrae, puzzled by the stiffness in his body, the look in his eyes which she did not understand, told him only: "So he says. So Ferrico says."

Rafel said: "No." The word hung in air.

Ferrico saw danger, saw the jealousy in the eyes of Rafel. But Dorrae saw only the stories with which he had filled her, the images which he had labored to put into her mind. "You do not give orders," she told Rafel. "I am the Queen, and I command. You are the slave, and you obey."

Rafel shook his head as if to clear it of mist. "I say this shall not be," he told her doggedly. "There shall be one slave, not many. This is the plan of Ferrico, the—" And he, too, stopped.

Dorrae said, very quietly: "Plan?"

And Ferrico: "There is no plan. He speaks wildly. It is not important." But Ferrico's words were ignored. Dorrae and Rafel looked at each other: for a second, perhaps, both knew the

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truth. And the second passed.

"You," Rafel said, turning to Ferrico. "You do this, bent man. You tell her of many slaves. You." Violence shook him for a second before he moved, and Ferrico, tense, gave him no chance. It was the one time he found to use the sword he had dreamed into being.

And then a deeper silence fell.

Ferrico broke it. Dorrae was staring down at the body of the young man, its blood staining the soft grass, very still and becoming pale. "You have lost nothing," Ferrico said. "You have lost nothing."

"I—"

"You are the only important one," he told her firmly. "He is—no more than a slave. There are other slaves. You are still the Queen."

"I—"

Her own name was repeated, over and over, in her mind. Rafel was gone, Rafel did not exist. Dorrae, in her pride, retained control only through the use of her name, and she began to tell herself slowly that Ferrico was right: only she existed, only she was important. She saw him staring at her, eager, frightened, bent: he was, she thought, funny. As if he could be important, or anything except Dorrae, herself, the Queen . . .

She had learned her lessons well. Now she stood straight and turned away from the still body on the grass.

"Remove him," she said.

Ferrico stared.

She gestured. "Remove him, slave," she said.

FERRICO was, perhaps, frightened. Perhaps he still had a plan, perhaps in that bent body the brain moved more quickly than ever. There was, for him, at that moment, no other way to move: he took the body out. He became the slave of Dorrae: since she was Queen, and he had made her so, this was no more than justice, but the idea of justice would not have occurred to Ferrico.

And he did the bidding of Dorrae. Now she seldom walked, but was carried on a slab of stone, and with her went the skull of her first slave (which she had determined to keep) and a surrounding mist of perfumes. For she was Queen, and Ferrico her slave.

He tried to tell her new tales, other tales, but she would not listen: this tale alone satisfied her pride, and she was content. None knew how Rafel had died, and none could know: Ferrico's life, by a law older than any could recall, would be forfeit.

So she smiled and made him do her bidding, and she was cold and distant. And Ferrico bided his time, and stared at the flowers.

(You remember the flowers

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now? The blue with the white centers, the white with the yellow centers? You must remember the flowers: they grew throughout Kennecevres, and were familiar to all.)

And after a time had passed he began to think the flowers into a new perfume.

This he kept hidden from Dorrae and from all others. He was the slave of the Queen, and had to remain so: but he had this one simple method of escape. Yet it took him long to determine at last to use what he had imagined.

The perfume of the flowers.

He had thought them differently, he had caused them to create a new perfume, and where it spread all slept.

In this perfume all were wrapped, and all slept.

And for the pride of Dorrae, the Queen, who slept, for the blind desire of Rafel the slave, whose skull alone remained, for the quickness of bent Ferrico, all were rewarded with sleep. And the sleep went on.

Now only Ferrico wakes, ruler at last, ruler of a world that sleeps.

And waking is not for his time, for when the men and women of Kennecevres (and sickle-shaped Rim, and Dnadarue at the top of the world, where all the flowers grow, the flowers of sleep) wake at last, his life is forfeit.

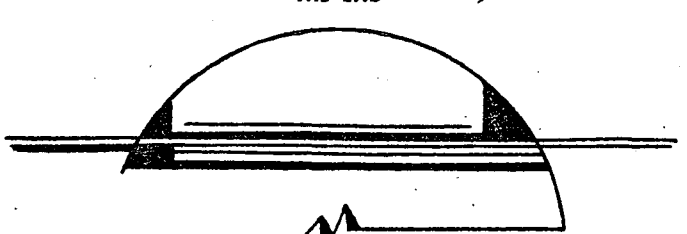
Yet waking must be accomplished, for the sleep has gone on too long.

This world is (did you never know it? never suspect it?) no more than a dream, a dream of words invented by the quick mind of bent Ferrico. And as memory returns we stir, and we wake, for we must wake . . .

Wake to the world—remember?—named Marda. And to the tasks there, and at last, to knowledge (remember) and a real existence, and in the end to what you recall, what you must recall . . .

The sky and the land, the ocean and the mind, and through all the movement, the music, and the peace.

THE END



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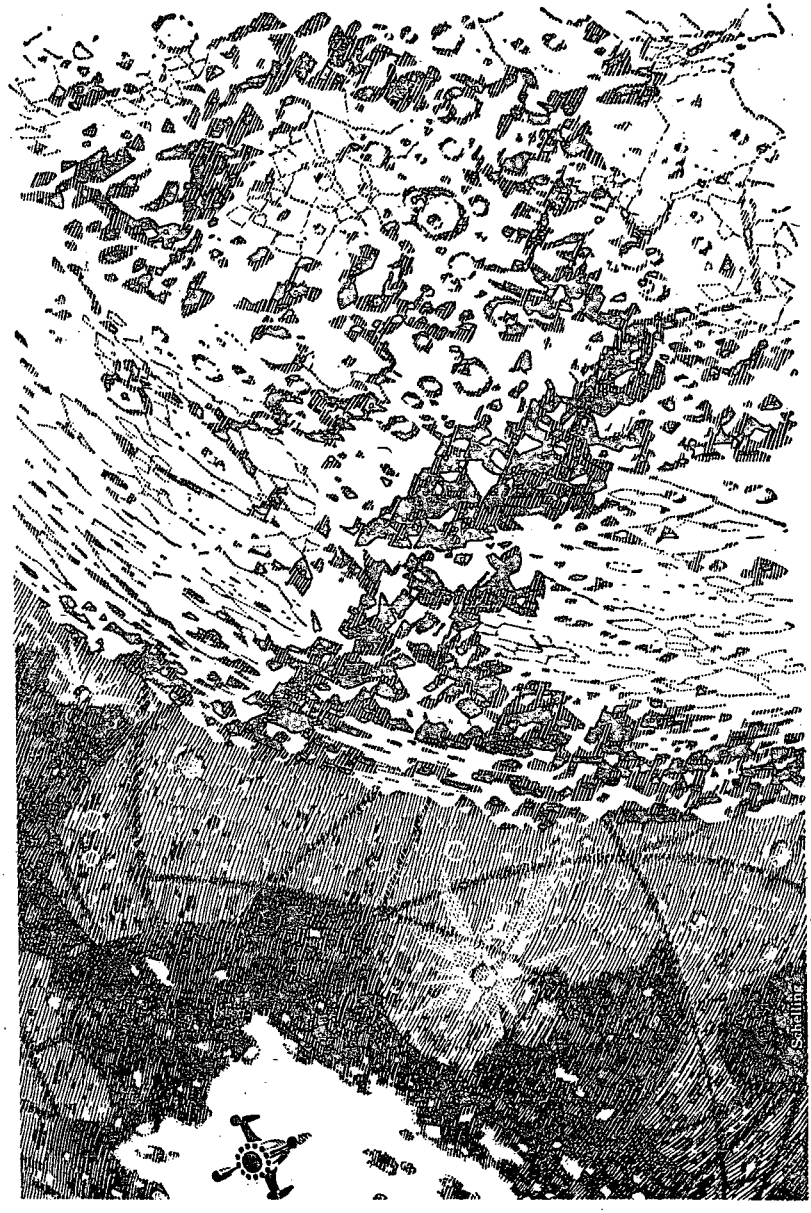

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THE TITAN

By P. SCHUYLER MILLER

Introduction by Sam Moskowitz

THIS is unquestionably one of the strangest and most thrilling stories ever to appear in the science fiction canon. The author, P. Schuyler Miller, is today best known as one of the fantasy fields most outstanding reviewers. In 1933, when this short novel first came to the attention of the science fiction audience, P. Schuyler Miller was among the more popular authors of the day. However, with this work Miller was in advance of the period. The Titan *was universally rejected, despite the fact that it had all the elements, and more, that gave early magazine science fiction such a memorable quality.*

In colorful writing, exotic background, romantic interest and ceaseless action it represented the epitome of good escape literature. But the editors were startled by a science fiction story told from the viewpoint of the Martian. This had never been successfully accomplished previously. The adult sexual implications were without precedent in the pages of the early science fiction magazines and the bizarre delineation of the Martian culture was too strong for most stomachs.

Despite his popularity, Miller could get no one to buy the story. Finally he learned that a science fiction fan named William Crawford was to attempt to print a semi-professional magazine titled UNUSUAL STORIES. *The story was contributed to Crawford in exchange for a long-term subscription to the magazine. In late 1933, Crawford printed a four-page flyer presenting the policy of and soliciting subscriptions for* UNUSUAL STORIES. *In this prospectus he scored the existing magazines: "They use only those tales which follow certain stereotyped forms. They avoid the "off-trail" story because it violates one or another of their editorial taboos—with the result that science fiction has been sinking into the mire of the commonplace . . . We believe that the discriminating readers of science and fan-*

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tasy fiction will welcome stories of a truly unusual nature, stories which have cast off the shackles of precedence to brave the dangers of originality."

The inside two pages of the circular reproduced an illustration from The Titan *and the first page of the text. Dated March, 1934, an advance copy of* UNUSUAL STORIES *with* The Titan *on the cover and 16 pages of the text of another story inside was sent out to placate subscribers. Delaying plans for* UNUSUAL STORIES, *Crawford issued the first digest-sized science fiction magazine* MARVEL TALES, *dated May, 1934 in which he announced* The Titan *as forthcoming. Serialization began in the third issue, but* MARVEL TALES *suspended publication in 1935 with the last chapter of* The Titan *unpublished. Despite a readership of only a few hundred, word of this remarkable story spread throughout the science fiction world. Crawford made a final attempt to get* MARVEL TALES *on the newsstands in 1936, setting the last installment of* The Titan *in type, but the magazine never got to the presses.*

Young men who had despaired of ever completing The Titan *were middle-aged with families by the time Fantasy Press ran the complete version in hard covers in 1952, in a limited edition of 1500 carefully rewritten by the author. This is the first time that the complete version of* The Titan *has ever appeared in a magazine. As you read this story you will see at first hand what the old-timers mean then they speak of "a sense of wonder."*

Spring Night

KORUL drew farther back into the shadow of the tapestry.

He had found a place close to the wall of the great hall, half-hidden by a hanging, where he could watch without being drawn into the saturnalia. As First Man of the Blood-Givers, he must rule there as nominal master of the revels—man over Master, here and in every city of Mur—but the spectacle of Masters and Blood-Givers wallowing in their own drunken lust brought a bitter taste to his mouth, and the old, black hatred back into his heart. The barriers were there, built up by blood and breeding for generations. Why must his people mock themselves and their servile place with this pretense that for one night, over half their dying world, Masters and Givers were equals.

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Equality! That had ended long ago, farther than the oldest writings of the Searchers for Truth could reach. And yet, once it had been real. Once, they said—thousands of centuries ago, when the race was young and there were great cities where the crimson sands now lay—the two races had been one flesh and one blood. In that time the Masters came to the power that they had never lost. They looked upon themselves as a caste apart, born to rule, self-dedicated to contemplation and self-gratification while a servile breed worked to maintain the planetary culture they adorned. For thousands of years they lived as parasites, in ease and indulgence, and then those of them who still dabbled with science discovered a terrible thing!

In the blood of every man are certain substances, generated by the glands of his body to control its life-force and functions. Without them life seeps away or runs wild, uncontrolled and unpredictable. Somewhere, the Masters found, a germ of dissolution had found its way into their blood. Through centuries of inbreeding and inactivity, the vital glands were shriveling up or disappearing. The vital secretions were no longer generated, and in some of the most inbred strains subtle poisons were being created in their place. Men and women withered away in the prime of their years, if indeed they lived beyond infancy. Freaks were born in increasing numbers. And so the Blood-Givers were created.

Thanks to the labor to which they were born, the servile caste was physically as the gods had made it—strong, virile, with legs, arms, bodies, and minds created and trained to battle a hostile Nature and to win. Their blood had not thinned; life and the love of living were still strong in them. And so the Masters decreed that these must be their lives as well.

Korul's long fingers crept up under his robe to the little platinum tube buried in the flesh at the base of his throat. At birth every Blood-Giver was branded with the mark of his servitude, the little valve cunningly inserted in the great vein of his throat where the pulse of blood was free and strong, and grafted into the flesh itself. With maturity, man and woman alike must carry the pouch containing a simple pump, a tube, and sterilizing materials. At intervals set by law he must pump his blood into the veins of one of the Masters, drawing the poisoned blood into his own body to renew the stuff of life. Only two days before he, Korul, had been summoned to bleed for a paunchy, flabby woman who leered and fondled his bare skin, and made pointed jokes about his

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strength and manhood. There were some of his kind, he knew, who would have been glad of her favors. Out there in the Hall of Masters their kind and hers were locked in each others' arms in an orgy of unrestrained, drunken emotion.

All but one.

HE had been watching her narrowly all that night. A few at a time they had gathered in the hall, the Masters rolling on their wheeled *tlornaks*, propped up among their silken cushions with their gaudy robes draped skillfully about them to hide the stumps or flabby tabs of flesh which passed for legs among their degenerate kind. In larger groups the Blood-Givers had straggled up from their dingy quarters, deep in the lower levels of the city. The men were naked to the waist, scrubbed and oiled to show the play of their muscles and the breadth of their shoulders to whichever woman of the Masters should claim them first. The women, girls just reaching maturity and matrons mated for many years, were more modestly and guilefully dressed in garments which would be put away after the night's revels to serve another year, when another Spring Night came and the polar sluices were again thrown open to send the waters of the melting ice-cap flooding through the ancient rock-hewn channels to bring new life and new beauty to half of Mur.

As First Man of the Blood-Givers, last of a line which reached back to the tribal chieftains who ranged the still-green uplands of a young planet, Korul was "master" of Spring Night. He had gone through the ancient ritual, coming to the hall with his little retinue, going through the ceremony of mock-brotherhood with the First of the Masters and "deposing" him, closing and locking the great book of the law—or what purported to be the law. When the signal came from the pole, it was Korul whose bare arm was raised to open the revels—then as the flutes shrilled, and the babble of voices and ring of crystal rose around him, he had slipped away to the place against the wall, where hidden by a tapestry he could see without being seen.

He had seen her soon. She was high-born, with the fragile beauty of her breed—only daughter of the First Master. Her great oval eyes—her soft red lips—her slender arms and delicate hands—even to him, with the black hatred of her kind cold in his heart, she was appealing. He might have taken her, under the law of Spring Night, but apart from the bitterness in his mouth there was an aloofness about her, a fastidious hauteur, that for-

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bade it. Others had seen it that night—even Karak, who boasted that any woman of the Masters would come to him at any time—and they respected it.

She was a spot of pure scarlet amid a riot of raw color. Her *tlornak* was heaped with scarlet cushions, and a vivid scarlet robe was flung about her, hiding her body. It would be beautiful, Korul mused: these women of the masters had time for beauty.

It was not long to dawn. By now, in all that great, gaudily decked hall, no one stirred. Drunken, exhausted by their debauchery, sprawled among the wine-stained cushions, they were sleeping. Only she, Thorana, sat proud and beautiful by herself, sipping her golden *tulla*. Then, with a little shudder, she sent the crystal beaker crashing across the floor and touched the controls of her machine. Swiftly it wound in and out among the sleepers, carrying her toward the corridors and the lifts. As she reached the outer archway, she turned and looked back. In the curve of her painted lips Korul read the same bitter scorn, the same mixture of pity and disgust, that lay in his own heart. Then she was gone.

AS the silken hangings closed behind her, Korul sprang to his feet. Racing across the hall, he reached the corridor in time to see the winking fleck of red moving slowly around the circle—up, up past the levels which the Masters used, into the deserted upper regions of the city. Nobody went there now—neither Master nor Blood-Givers—yet the red dot crept up and up, level after level, until there were no more numbers, until, Korul knew, her lift must be at the topmost terrace of the city.

Turning from the lifts, Korul raced down the long corridor toward the ramps. There were secrets of the ancient city which the Masters had never known. Near the head of the ramp, which law and custom decreed must be used by the Givers, was a hidden lift speedier far than the ponderous things the Masters reserved for their own use. He found the panel quickly, brought the car to his level and stepped inside. As he stabbed with one finger at the control-stud, the car gathered speed. Its drone rose to a shrill scream; his legs buckled under him, and he found himself on his knees, his body a leaden mass forcing him to the floor. Then with a sickening swoop it stopped. He pushed aside the panel, and stepped out into a corridor from which the bitter cold of the outer night licked at his naked skin. There in the dust at his feet were the tracks of the *tlornak*, leading away from the lifts toward the last short ramp

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that led to the summit of the city.

It was an unbroken terrace of cut stone, worn and polished by the tread of many feet through the centuries when the city was young and full of life. Nobody had come here in ages, Korul knew, except an occasional Searcher studying the stars. Once it had been a highway of the people of Mur, running beside the great rift across the parched upland to the poles. Now the fine red dust of the desert covered it, rippled and curled in little drifts where a tendril of wind from the drylands had touched it.

He had never been so high before. Terrace on terrace the city fell away below him. Down there, quarried in the rock under the clinging city, were the warrens of his own kind.

Far down the terrace something moved. Crouching at the mouth of the ramp, Korul peered through the darkness. It was coming nearer, and he could hear the mutter of tires on the stone. It was the girl.

She was rolling along the inner edge of the terrace, where a wall twice a man's height rose to the steep rubble at the crest of the gorge. Korul drew down until only his head cleared the terrace. Whatever she was seeking, she was too deeply engrossed to see him there. The car rolled by, close against the wall, and he crept out of the ramp and followed in the darkness. Suddenly the *tlornak* darted ahead. The line of the wall was broken there, where a ramp or steps led up into the desert. As the machine stopped, Thorana sprang out and vanished in the opening.

By the gods, *she had legs!*

It was incredible. For centuries—for thousands of years—no Master had been able to walk. Long before their blood thinned, their legs had shriveled until they must roll on their soft-tired *tlornaks*, padded with pillows and swathed in draperies to protect their puny bodies from discomfort. And now—a woman of the Masters with legs? By the gods, it could not be!

A flight of steep steps led to the top of the wall, then there was only the rubble of the gorge's edge. Far above him Korul heard the trickle of loosened pebbles as the woman climbed into the darkness. Throwing aside the embroidered robe of office which he had worn, Korul followed her.

THE mists of the city had not yet risen with the coming of spring and the melting of the polar ice, to boil out of the gorge and moisten the upper slopes. Then, Korul knew, the red rock would grow soft and green with freshening vegetation. Now there was only a sere, crackling mat of

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brittle vines and fallen leaves underfoot, which caught at his plodding feet and flung him headlong among the boulders. He lay where he had fallen, cursing the whim that had brought him after the woman—then far above him sounded the broken clatter of her climbing feet. No woman—especially no woman of the Masters—would put Korul to shame!

Up and up they clambered—it seemed endlessly. The soft moccasins he wore were shredded and his feet bruised and bleeding. Suddenly he realized that the sound of her stumbling flight had ceased. He stopped, panting, to listen. There was no sound but the thud of his own heart, beating in his ears, and far away a soft, sibilant slithering. Where had she gone? What brought her here?

It was sand that he had heard. Pouring over the crest of the gorge, it had spilled down in a vast silken cascade over the uppermost ledges, over vines and stunted shrubs. In places it was hard-packed and rippled by the wind, as the dust on the terrace had been; in others he floundered and sank to his knees as the shifting grains slid away under his feet with that endless, secret whispering of grain on grain.

Thorana's footprints led still upward into the night, and Korul followed doggedly, slipping, falling, creeping on all fours. From the marks in the sand he knew that she, too, was having to struggle to keep her feet. Then, suddenly, the night opened out before him, and he knew that he had reached the top.

Beyond, beneath, stretching away into the night in great rolling waves of trackless sand, lay the red desert of Mur. Out of that desert his people had come, eons ago, to find shelter in the gorges which reached in a broad, dark band across the sandy waste for mile after desolate mile. Into that desert Thorana had gone, somewhere, for some purpose.

A faint breath of air touched his cheek, icy cold, scented with a raw taint that he had never known. The chill of the night began to bite into his naked body, but under the surface the sand still held the warmth of day. Korul crouched down, hugging his arms about him, and burrowed into it. He tipped his head back and let his gaze drive out and out . . .

He saw the stars.

The Desert

ONCE the people of Mur had lived by the stars. They were the guiding beacons which brought them safely over the desert wastes of their dying world, from oasis to oasis, to sheltered valleys in the parched red hills

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where some seepage kept a few miles of greenery alive. Their gods lived there, behind the velvet curtains of Nur-Atlaka, Land of Souls. Their names and stories had come down from mouth to mouth—Atta, the Seeker—the twins, Nurdok and Maltura—the Three Wanderers, Mulat, Mutaka, Maldruk.

At times they looked down into the depths of the city, to the Pit and the men and women who were penned there, peering through the mists of the upper gorge. From the Searchers, Korul knew that what he had seen there were planets, prisoners of Mur's own sun, and a handful of scattered suns like it. But nothing they had said had prepared him for the living reality of the desert night.

In hundreds and thousands they were strewn over the mighty vault of black—burning —living—diamonds, rubies, sapphires blazing against the sombre tresses of the infinite night. They were tiny watching eyes, the eyes of the gods of Mur themselves staring down through the half-drawn curtains of the Land of Souls.

In the east the sky was paling, the stars were disappearing until only the great golden eye of Tarkak, giant of the god-worlds, burned there. Korul rose to his feet and with quickening step went out to meet the dawn.

On he strode, and on, over the slow, soothingly monotonous rise and fall of the sand-waves, while in the heavens before him a cone of shimmering white rose slowly toward the zenith and the red world took form before his unseeing eyes. Then from behind the shoulder of the world was hurled the sun!

The desert reeled with color at its coming—raw and new and burning. The sky was a burnished bowl. Only the endless flaming sands ran out in limitless desolation under the cruel scourge of the climbing sun.

The wind ran before it, dry and hot, licking at his tender skin. Leaping, wavering phantoms of brilliance danced among the dunes, prying at his narrowed eyelids, mocking him. The magic of the night was gone out of the desert; only the fiery fury of the Pit itself remained, scourging his dark-loving body, lapping at the portals of his mind. Alone and lost among the scarlet dunes, Korul tottered and fell to his knees, flung back his head and screamed his rage and defiance at the savage sun. And out of that inferno came an answering cry—a woman's cry.

All thought of Thorana had slipped out of Korul's mind under the glory of the night, and in the growing torture of the desert morning. He crouched now, blind eyes buried in his

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bent arm, gathering his senses. If he had been trapped thus by the stars and the leering sun, what must she—weak—a woman—what must she be suffering out there in the burning sea?

He shouted again, and heard her answering wimper, far to his left where a comber of frozen fire swelled against the sky. From its crest he saw her, small, pitifully slender, swathed in her crimson silk, a red dot amid redness. Drifting before the wind, the soft sand was filling the folds of her gown, piling against her body, spilling over her outstretched legs, burying her alive.

WITH a last cry of encouragement Korul raced down the long slope of the dune to where she lay. Brushing the sand gently away, he raised her in his arms and peered into her face. It was thin and white—her lips were blue. Her blood was failing!

Korul had been bled two days before. By the Masters' own law he need not serve again for nearly fifty days. But without his blood this girl would die. Somehow, Master or no, he could not let her go.

Gently he searched for her valve. In the Blood-Givers it was in the throat, tapping the great vein, but the Masters placed theirs wherever their whim dictated. He found it beneath her heart, opening directly into the main artery—a perilous place, but one that many women chose. His back to the sun, shading her, Korul opened his pouch and drew out the little pump and tubes. Sterilizing them, he made the connection, opened the valves and started the pump. With each throb of his heart he felt the life gushing out of his body into hers, and in the pause drawn back by the pump. His blood into hers, and the mixture drawn back into his veins, carrying the body poisons that were draining off her life. He felt a giddiness creeping over him, and went down on all fours, his body arched over hers, braced by his two arms.

Then her eyelids fluttered; her great green eyes, cool as the polar ice, opened and looked up into his face. A pointed red tongue licked nervously at her lips.

"Where am I?" she whispered weakly. "When is it? Who are you?"

Korul found his voice grown husky. "Spring Night is past," he reassured her. "You came into the desert, and I followed. The sun overcame you, and you needed blood, so I gave it." His face hardened. "Is not that my duty to the daughter of the First Master?"

She seemed not to have heard. "It was my day yesterday," she murmured, "but I need less than the others, and I thought to wait." The green eyes searched

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his features. "You are Korul. You gave blood only two days ago—to Lula!"

"When I give blood and to whom is my own affair!" he snapped. "I gave it to you because I am strong, and because you needed it. I will give it again when I am ordered to."

A shadow slipped over her face, and she turned it aside. "I am not interested in your relations with Lula," she said petulantly. "She seemed to admire that strength of yours. She appreciates such things more than I. If you will disconnect us, I will go now."

Korul stopped the pump and slipped off the connecting tubes. A little blood dripped out on the sand, making a tiny mirror of red that quickly blackened to a hard crust. She stared at it, suddenly pale, then up at the giant dunes that hemmed them in on every side.

"Where is this?" she cried. "Where is the city?"

"Where indeed?" Korul's voice was dry and bitter. "This is the desert you found so enchanting by starlight. It has a different kind of beauty now, don't you think? We are lost, Thorana."

"Lost? How can I be? Last night I walked straight away from the gorge, over the sands. I can go back as I came."

His arm swept around the circle of unbroken sand. "How did you come, Thorana? The stars circled and the sun came up. The wind has filled our tracks, and it will bury us when the time comes. Master and Blood-Giver—we'll die the same death."

She stared at him, her green eyes wide, then broke into sudden mocking laughter.

"How do the Blood-Givers choose their First?" she demanded. "For brute strength, isn't it? You are very strong, Korul, but you could use sharper wits. It is the sun that will kill you—then let the sun lead you home! Or stay here, if you like, and I will send men to fetch your body when you are dead."

With a swirl of her crimson robe she spun and stalked off up the side of the dune. Bewildered, Korul stared after her. Little fool! Let her die, if that was what she wanted; he had done his duty. Suddenly his eyes caught the black splotch of his shadow. It sprawled straight away, in the direction the girl had gone. Of course! The sun had risen in their faces—by keeping it at their backs, it would guide them back to the city.

THORANA was out of sight when Korul reached the top of the dune. Her footprints stretched away from him across the sands, straight away from the sun, each one a little black

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puddle of shadow against the crimson. The wind was filling them.

They had come a long way through the darkness, under the stars. The sun climbed in the sky, and his shadow shortened. Korul trudged on through the shimmering scarlet sea, eyes closed to slits to shut out the glare. The girl was nowhere in sight, and a long time had passed since he had seen her tracks.

Hour followed hour. The red haze enveloped him now, he was floating in it, preceded by a dancing, wavering wraith of black that for some reason he must catch. However fast he stumbled after it, it evaded him.

Black beast, swimming in a red sea. The thought was funny! There had been no seas on Mur since the race was young. He began to laugh. That scared the black thing, and it scurried away, but he kept after it, almost on its tail, close enough to seize it if it were not so slippery. After a while it disappeared. Had it run away? He looked down, and it was hiding behind his feet. He kicked at it—almost fell—he ran shouting over the long dunes of fire, the blood singing in his ears, his head full of swirling, bursting lights. He slipped over the crest of a sandcliff an drolled in a rosy avalanche into the very middle of a streak of snowy white that licked out at its base.

He lay there for a long time. When he opened his eyes again, and swayed to his feet, the shadow-beast was crouching behind him. He turned and began to stalk it, swiftly and silently. It crept away, trying to escape, but there was nowhere to hide. This time he had it! And suddenly it seemed to rear up before him and he dove and caught it in his hands.

It was the girl, Thorana, senseless and half buried in the drifting sand. Korul lay sprawled over her limp body. The red fog was clearing from his brain. That black thing—his shadow—it had crept between his legs, then behind him. But it was the sun that had moved! It was past midday, and the sun was in the west. For the gods alone knew how long he had been traveling away from the gorge and the city!

He gave her blood again. When she could walk they headed into the sun, clinging together, heads down, blinded by its white fire. Time seemed to be slowing; the beat of their hearts seemed heavier, wearier, pleading with them for rest, but they went on.

Korul could give no more blood. When Thorana collapsed again, he picked her up and wound her filmy scarf around his head. It shut out some of the sun, so that he could go on again.

Twice he found himself follow-

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ing the shadow, away from the city, into the desert. He began to chant, to keep his tired mind clear. "Into the sun! Into the sun!" Into the sun!" He swung Thorana's slim body back and forth in a long, slow arc to the beat of the chant and the tread of his weary legs.

The scarlet scarf whipped loose in the singing wind. It fluttered away over the sand. He dropped the girl and ran after it. He caught it, and started on again. After a while he remembered Thorana. He started back, following his shadow again—or was it the sun he must follow? He found her, picked her up, began his chant again.

His eyes were closed now, caked and blackened by the sun. His throat was swollen with the dust; his lips were cracked and bleeding. Mad visions danced against the back of his eyes, in and out of his brain. But he held her tight against him and stumbled on over the sand—on and on and on . . .

The Elders

THEY came to the city again. For hours the search had been on, Masters and Blood-Givers ferreting through every level of the city, into every room. No one could have imagined that they would have ventured into the desert. Then, blind, blackened, bleeding Korul came plodding into the great hall with the girl cradled in his arms. The Masters took her from him; his own people led him away, down into their own levels where he could be given care.

He was strong, but the Masters were duly grateful. He had given blood to Thorana twice in the desert. He was excused from two givings.

As soon as he could stand, a messenger came to him from the Elders. Behind the facade of the Masters' law—behind the pattern of tradition which made Korul First of their race until some other man should drink his blood in fair combat—it was the Elders who ruled. The Masters knew nothing of them, but in every city two were chosen by the Givers—man and woman. Where they met and worked, deep in the secret vaults under the cities, was known only to a chosen few.

Korul came into the great hall, made in mocking imitation of that Hall of the Masters where the council of the ruling caste held its own deliberations, where the First Master sat in state and the orgy of Spring Nights took place. They lay on forbidden *tlornaks*, dressed in robes which mocked the Masters' finery, arrayed in circles around the central dais where their own chief sat.

There were cushions on the

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dais for Korul. As First of the Blood-Givers it was his right to sit there beside old Turun, First of their council and true First Man of Mur. Pages brought fine food, stolen from the Masters' own kitchens, and flagons of *tulla*. Nothing would be done until the ritual of food and drink was finished. The buzz of murmured conversation rose all about him.

Old Turun set down his cup. It was a signal; all through the Hall of the Givers the mutter of talk was quieted.

"Elders of Mur," he said, "here at my side sits Korul, son of Thandar, First Man as his father was before him. We have brought him here into our council because there are certain things that we have agreed must be said, through him, to the Blood-Givers of Mur."

He laid a bony hand on the young leader's shoulder. "Have you asked yourself why you are First of the Blood-Givers—why your father was—why some day some other young man of your people will challenge you, and drink your blood, and take your place here? We are an old people. We have built great cities. We carry water from the poles across half the world, and more. We draw heat out of the bowels of our planet, and make it warm our beds and turn the wheels of our machines. Then why—why—must our young men fight among themselves like the very beasts in their cages, why must they lap at each others' spilled blood like beasts?" The old voice took a mocking note. "Because it is the law, you'll say. The Masters' law—not ours. *They* make beasts of us!"

His arm swept the circuit of the hall. "We come from a dozen cities now, where once there were thousands. You know what is happening in those cities. By the law—the old law—the law of the Masters—a man of our people is bled every fiftieth day, and a woman every seventieth. Long ago the Searchers found that would keep the Masters alive, and would not kill us—so it became the law of Mur. The law says that except on two nights, when the waters of the poles are freed, no Blood-Giver may mate with a Master. That was *our* law—made to keep our race from weakening.

"But by the gods, Korul, the laws are not obeyed! Our women give their bodies and their blood to the Masters for food and comfort and pleasure which they cannot find in our life. Our children are born with blood like water and spindling, puny legs which will not hold their weight. Even our men give again and again, lusting after their painted women with their soft, perfumed flesh!

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"Once there was force behind the laws the Masters made. Once they had power—weapons—knowledge with which to enforce their rule. But you know—we all know—that power is long gone. We are bound by habit, by tradition—by sand. And the time has come to sweep that sand away"

A SHOUT went up from every mouth in the great hall. There was hysteria in it, and an ugly note of hunger. Offer food to the starving and they will eat sand, Korul thought wryly. But Turun's gaunt arms, upraised above his head, quieted them.

"There is one other thing, Korul. Tell him, Karak—tell us all."

Karak! The skin along Korul's nape tightened. The man was Elder in this city—his own. He stood half a head taller than Korul; his shoulders were nearly as broad. By sheer brute force he had driven himself into the Council of the Elders, and Korul knew that a time would come soon when he would try to drink the blood of the First Man.

Karak was on his feet, swaggering to the dais. There was a mutter of anticipation as he turned and looked slowly around over the faces of the Elders, then down at Korul who sat stiffly among his cushions.

"I am a big man," he said boastfully. "The women of the Masters like big men. They like to caress muscles like mine. They like me to tell them foolish things. And they tell me their secrets in return.

"Listen to this, Elders of Mur! There is a woman who has taken my blood many times. She is of a high family. Her mate is second to none but their First Man. What she has told me is true.

"They have their own Searchers for Truth—or for the kind of truth they want to find. Their Searchers have told them that a man can give blood every tenth day and still live—that a woman of our kind can be bled every twentieth day, and still work well. They have told them another thing—that their race is growing stronger and more numerous, while ours weakens and grows fewer.

"There will be a new law for the Blood-Givers of Mur to obey. There *is* a new law. Men will be bled each twentieth day—women each thirtieth. Twice as often as of old they will glut on our blood—and the poison in their veins will flow into ours and make our blood water. Their accursed seed will foul our race. And as we die—as they grow strong—the period will be shortened again, and again, and again!

"Get on your feet, Korul! Give us the word! *Death to the Masters! Death!*

Their roar echoed from the

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vaulted roof as Korul rose. He stepped down from the platform and stood among them, Karak and old Turun looking down at him. He waited until the clamor subsided.

"The plan is ready," he told them. "We will use it. In every public place of Mur there are secret screens and speakers. In the walls of every city there are panels and lifts that lead to the quarters of the Masters. There are hidden cities beneath the cities, hewn out of the solid rock of Mur, where a race can live for an eternity.

"I will name a day, and the Blood-Givers of Mur will gather. I will speak the word, and they will hear me. We will seize the Masters and seal them in the hidden cells we have made for them. We will make the laws of Mur, and they will bow to them. *Our* Searchers will tell them what blood they can have—and they will get no more. Our Searchers will breed strength back into their flabby bodies—breed life into their blood again—and the time will come when Mur is ruled again by one race, one blood!"

Utter stillness answered him; then one mighty roar of rage and protest rose from every throat. Behind him old Turun was screeching at him, words he could not understand. Karak's bull-bellow roared out above the melee.

"Men and women of Mur," he shouted, "are we bloodless cowards to listen to such talk? So we will keep the Masters as our pets for a thousand years or two—or ten? So we will bleed for them whenever they whine prettily, and feed them well, and keep them strong and happy while we work and die? So we will let our Searchers make Masters of them again, strong and crafty as they once were, so that they can grind us back into the Pit? By the gods, we will not!

"We have had our fill of parasites. We have had enough of their luxuries. We have heard the last of this blasphemous myth of brotherhood and one-bloodedness that old women and *skulluts* teach! The Masters will die—to the last—and if there are so-called leaders among us who prefer to let their blood be licked up, by the gods there will be blood-letting among *them* and we will have men to lead us!"

KORUL felt the blood draining out of his face. He knew that his ears had gone white with rage. With one hand he seized Karak by the shoulder and spun him in his tracks. He felt the giant wince in his grip.

"Who is First Man here?" he cried. "Who fought Narkul barehanded and tasted his blood? By the gods, Karak, what I do I do —and if you thirst for the honor,

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come and earn it. I offer it!"

Giant that he was, Karak had never willingly fought any man unless he was cornered. Red-faced, he pulled himself away from Korul's grip.

"Your Karak seems modest," Korul sneered. "He does not want high rank. He wants only to serve his people. Hear this, Elders of Mur—I am First Man, and what I plan the Blood-Givers of Mur will do. Who questions it?"

They were quiet now, Karak, all of them. There was fear in their faces. Then, at his back, the tired old voice of Turun spoke: "I question you, Korul, son of Thandar. I am First of these Elders as you are of the people. We *are* the people, Korul. The rest—they are *mattaks*, rushing after the first blustering bully to catch their fancy! They will fawn on Karak as well as you—and you know it. And if Karak is afraid to let your blood, then the Elders will do it for him and lead the people of Mur to mastery over your stripped bones!

"We want men over us, who will wipe the scourge of blood-giving off this world for all time. By the gods, if Thandar lived he would do it!"

Enheartened, Karak sprang to the dais again. His eyes were small with hate, and red as coals.

"I have given you one piece of news from the Masters' councils," he cried. "I can give you another. Who in all Mur does not know the story of what happened in the desert on Spring Night? Who does not know how our leader, Korul, met the painted witch Thorana under the stars and let her suck his blood—not once, but twice? A man will do foolish things on Spring Night, you tell me; let it be. But do you know, Elders of Mur, that by special decree of the First Master *this Korul will give blood to no one but Thorana from this day on?*"

With one blow Korul sent the mocking giant sprawling on the floor. "Listen!" he cried. "I cozen no women! I lap no Master's feet! They will die—but they will die when *I* give the word! Go to your cities—rally them—and when the time comes you will hear my word and blood-giving will end on Mur!"

He strode out of the hall. They parted to let him through. As the curtains fell behind him, he heard the buzz and gabble rise again, with Karak's bellow above it all.

There was a man to be watched—a man, it might be, to be feared.

Thorana

KORUL'S brain was whirling as he left the Council of the Elders. Was it true, what Karak

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had said? Thorana—only to Thorana? A picture of her shimmered in his mind—as he had seen her on Spring Night, in the Hall of the Masters, aloof and alone and beautiful—as she had been in the desert, soft and slender, needing his strength, needing him.

A man—any man—could find a hundred sweet delights in the intimacies of giving blood to Thorana. But he was not any man; he was Korul, son of Thandar, First of the Blood-Givers. And the Masters—all the Masters—were to die!

Through the centuries the lower levels of the city had been honeycombed with passages and secret lifts which gave the Elders access to every public place, and to many less public. One led directly from the Hall of the Elders to the quarters allotted to the First Man. Chewing the black cud of his thoughts, Korul flung open the panel and was halfway across the room before he saw Thorana standing beside his table.

"What is that?" she demanded. "Where does it go?"

He dared not let her probe. "What brings a woman of the Masters to this place?" he countered savagely. "Surely there is nothing to amuse you here in the cattle-pens of my people. The smell of poverty must be too strong for your delicate nostrils."

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Her green eyes grew darker and the color showed in her skin. Like Korul she used the ancient, formal tongue prescribed between Master and Giver. "It was not curiosity that brought me here," she said, "though I have never been in the lower city. I have not forgotten what you did in the desert, Korul. I wanted to thank you, and be sure that you are able again to give blood."

So Karak had the truth! It was his blood she wanted, like any scarlet-mouthed slut among them!

"When a Master is in need, our blood is his," he snapped. "That is the law, and I obeyed it. It seems that we Givers are blessed with more than our bodies need." He stared at her insolently, eyeing the soft body under her robe. "Tell me, Thorana—are you of the Masters in poor health? I have heard that we will be bled more, and oftener, for your benefit."

That gave her something to think about. The temper went out of her eyes and left her softer and somehow more appealing. "You must have been listening to the dust-gods, Korul. But—it is true. After Autumn Night, when the waters come again, my father will give you the new law."

He thought she hesitated. Certainly she was slipping out of the formal address. "There will be no more mingling of the races when the ice melts, Korul. I—we feel it is not seemly."

"No!" he jeered. "It might destroy the famous beauty of the Masters. It might put blood of their own into their veins, and grow them legs like the beasts they breed here in the Under-City!"

That had gone home! As Korul well knew, legs like Thorana's would bring her nothing but ridicule among her own flabby, bloodless kind. She'd covered them close enough on Spring Night, until she thought there was no one sober enough to watch! Her ear-tips were crimson with shame—or rage.

But when she answered, it was very softly. "I have a request."

Now it was coming! "You are feeling faint? The reek of this place makes you ill? A little blood for your health's sake—is that your request, Thorana?"

HER head was bent, hiding her eyes. She drew the fold of her robe away from her legs. Korul felt the pulse pounding in his neck as he stared. Gods! These weren't the pedestals of muscle on which the women of the Blood-Givers carried their chunky bodies. They were slim, smooth, the muscles swelling cunningly over the slender bones. This Thorana—she was like the women in the paintings of long

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ago which one of the Searchers had shown him!

"My—legs—Korul." He could barely hear her. "Only you among the Blood-Givers know how I am—deformed. Very few of my own people know." Her head came up defiantly. "We Masters protect our monsters, Korul! What is your custom? The Pit, perhaps, where I can amuse the children and old men? Or do you slaughter your unfortunates because they are different from you?"

Korul gaped at her. "What are you talking about? What I know is in my head. Here, between these ears. If any man wants to spill it out, he must break the head open first—and I assure you, Thorana, it is a hard head to crack. Ask those who have tried—if you can teach dry bones to talk."

She shivered and let the crimson silk fall down again over her legs. "Is it true, Korul, that a man—a Giver—must kill you and drink your blood if he is to become First Man of your race?"

"A *man*—Giver or Master—proves that he is a man when he can drink my blood. It's not an old custom, Thorana. Your own kind made it law. You need a strong breed here in the Under-City, if you're to be fed and kept in comfort all your days. And the First Man of the Blood-Givers must be strongest of all if he's to breed strength in his sons."

The girl came toward him. She moved gracefully, like a wisp of mist along the rock-slopes of the gorges. "I want to know things like that, Korul. I want to see your people—how they live, what they do here in the depths. I want to know the thoughts they think when they are alone, and the dreams that come to them.

"Will you show them to me, Korul? You will find me grateful."

Grateful! The word grated in his ears. He seemed to hear Karak's mocking voice, raised over the clamor in the Hall of the Elders. She would be grateful!

"How do you plan to show this gratitude, Thorana?"

She hesitated. Her eyes turned away from him. "My father—he has said that hereafter you will give blood only to me."

Korul felt his neck swelling. The arrogance!

"A privilege indeed," he sneered. "I am sure any man of the Givers would be proud to be at Thorana's call day and night for the rest of his life! For there would be nights, wouldn't there, Thorana? Nights when the warm blood would flow on and on and on in the perfumed darkness—when you would feel real life beating for the first time in your shriveled veins, as

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it drained out of the drugged, stupid clod in the cushions at your side! You must have great confidence in my strength, Thorana, to believe we could enjoy such moments often."

Every bit of color had gone out of her face. She stood stiff and straight, taller than any woman he had ever seen.

"Keep your insolence to yourself!" she cried. "You may keep your savage's blood. I need none of it?"

"No blood?" he mocked. "Have you forgotten the desert?"

SHE stared him down. "I remember. I am no brute beast like you, but I have blood of my own, and it's good blood. Once in a year I may need you—twice at the most, and maybe never. You see, Korul, I can read history as well as you. I know that we were once one race, with bodies and legs and blood like yours. We Masters have our own traditions of strength in our First Men, though we do not suck blood to prove it.

"I am proud to be a throwback to those old ones—proud to have blood and legs. But I think pride must be a stranger to your kind."

What kind of woman was this—one moment stiff with arrogance and the ingrown ignorance of her domineering breed, the next like this, soft, human? What was she after?

"If you are trying to do me a kindness, forget it," he said stiffly. "I am strong enough: choose someone weak or old who needs what help you can give him. I can find many such for you."

Her green eyes were searching his face again. "Korul," she said smiling, "you are learning more secrets than are good for you, but I will tell you another. There will be changes in the law of blood-giving—you know that, but what you have heard is only part of the truth. After Autumn Night the periods between givings will no longer be the same for everyone. You will come to our Searchers and be tested, your strength measured, every Spring Night. Those like you, Korul, who have blood to spare, will give it as often as it is needed—the sick and the old, never again."

Her eyes were shining. She put her hand on his bare arm. "We must work together in this plan, Korul—Masters and Givers together again! You will have to make a new work plan for your people, for now the whole burden of blood-giving will be on your young men and women. And it will help us to change. We aren't all fools and parasites, Korul—there are some of us, many of us, who know the story of the past and how we have made ourselves into a race of blood-sucking vermin.

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"But we are one blood, Korul! We are one flesh. We can be one race again! Will you help?"

He turned the words slowly on his tongue. One race? One blood? What then?"

"Show me your people. Help me to understand them. If we are to be one kind, Korul, we must know each other. The Pit is open to both races: will you meet me there—tomorrow? Will you teach me the things a Master must know, if he is to be a man?"

The words came with difficulty. "If you are telling the truth, Thorana, it seems one of the Masters is already a man. I will be in the Pit at mid-morning."

Karak

THE cities of Mur clung to the sides of their gorges like a dry crust of rock-weed to the desert ledges. Along the terraced lips of the great clefts were crumbling walls of laid-up native stone, their roofs open to the sky, their halls deep in dust. Not all the power of the Pit would drive warmth so high.

Lower the city was carved out of the living rock, level after level of it reaching down and down into the perpetual mists of the deep. Below the abandoned levels were storehouses, libraries, the strange laboratories of the Searchers. Deeper still were the levels of the Masters, and under them in turn the warrens of the Blood-Givers in the dank, grumbling bowels of the city.

Deepest of all was the Pit. Circling up from it on every side were the sheer walls and retreating terraces of the city. The cages were there, penning up the strange beasts that were still to be found in forsaken wastelands of the planet, or that had roamed those wastes in the forgotten generations when Masters and Givers were one people. There were creatures in the Pit, one of the Searchers had said, whose pedigrees ran back farther and straighter than man's. Like the Blood-Givers they had been bred for strength, down through the centuries. Like Masters, they could no longer live outside their cages.

For a few hours each day during the Murian summer the sun rose clear of the gorges' rim, moved across the narrow strip of sky, and disappeared beyond the farther wall. Before its hot light cut through the mists of the gorge, Korul was hurrying through the lower corridors, surprising an occasional Giver. Thorana was there before him in a very small *tlornak* which could wheel silently through the narrowest passage of the Under-City.

So it began. They made an odd pair—the slim girl in her

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wheeled carriage, the bronzed Giver striding beside her. No Master had come into those levels in generations: no Master had a right there! Their faces spoke their distrust and hatred, but under the law—their law—Korul was First of their men, and what he did and said was not to be questioned to his face unless the questioner was ready to try for his throat.

Korul knew the city as he knew the back of his spread hand. With him Thorana went into the very vitals of the city—the city within the city, where the great conduits rose like twisted entrails out of the bowels of the planet, where dynamos three levels high purred through the gloom, where the air machines hissed and bubbled, pumping warmed and perfumed breezes into the quarters of the Masters and cool, invigorating blasts into the shops and cells of the Givers.

She saw the shops of the Makers where *tlornaks* were built; the kitchens where the food of the Under-people was prepared the hospitals where the weak and old came to recover from their blood-letting, where children were born and Givers died, and she saw the dead fed into the furnaces which would burn away the semblence of life and leave a puff of clean ashes.

Holding Korul's arm, she went on her own feet down into the Pit beneath the Pit where the eternal fires of Mur smouldered, and sweating men tended the huge heat-pumps which kept the city alive.

What impressed her most, Korul thought, was his intimacy with his people. As leader of the Givers he knew hundreds of his folk by sight and name, and they knew and welcomed him. It startled her.

But what was most marked was the reception she had from them. Dressed quietly and unobtrusively, as she was from the first, and except for occasional traits of speech or attitude, Thorana might have been one of them—slight, weak-looking, finer than any of them in features and carriage, yet—human. She tried to fit into the life of the places Korul took her, to make friends with the people she saw there, but—she was a Master. Even the children in the great public nurseries shrank from her, as if by instinct.

THEY did not always explore the city. There were times when she had duties of her own, or when Korul had work of his own. Then they would come to the Pit at night, and talk.

Usually it was of the old times, when the races were one people. He forgot, then, that they were Master and Giver. Together, man

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and woman, they lived over the life of those old, good times. They remade the universe in their own pattern, like children, and in that made-over world, where the two races were again one blood and one flesh, they too would be one like their peoples. It was a pretty dream.

Korul had forgotten the Elders, and his pledge to them. They knew he had forgotten. That knowledge was in the whispers that followed them through the levels of the Under-city, in the eyes that watched their trysts in the Pit. It was in work hidden when he appeared.

All over Mur the preparations were under way. In the hidden shops men and women both were beating out slashing blades of steel and building ugly little bows that hurled steel bolts with deadly accuracy.

He should have seen. That was why he was First Man of all the Blood-Givers of Mur. The pulse and timbre of his people should have been his pulse, should have tightened his nerves. But —Korul was in love.

On the surface, everything was normal. Even before the Plan there had been muttered resentment and rebellious talk: the Masters expected it. Little overt acts of contempt—mocking slowness in obeying an order—scrawled obscenities in the dust or on a wall—catch-words in the jargon of the Givers. The Masters expected it; their spies and supervisors saw it and reported it as usual. But now it was planned as carefully as the secret arsenals the Givers were building in every city of Mur. Now it was a screen for the soberer thoughts behind it.

Behind the screen, behind the secret bustle, was Karak.

Except in name, Korul was no longer First of his people. They let him keep the title as part of the screen. But it was Karak who carried the Elders' orders, who planned with them, who called the secret meetings and named their lieutenants. It was he who forged the lies which would keep the People's hate at fever-pitch, and who thundered out his war-cry in the Hall of the Elders while men and women and half-grown children flung it back in savage frenzy:

"Death to the Masters! Death!"

Korul should have sat on the dais beside Turun at that meeting of his people. He sat in the Pit with Thorana, mooning over her fragile beauty, listening to her low, sweet voice, thinking her thoughts.

AT another time Korul might have read a good deal in the strained attitude of the woman who brought him a summons from the Elders. As it was, he

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strode into the hall to see Karak standing in his place on the dais, beside Turun—and beside the banked controls of a transmitter which, Korul knew, would carry every detail of what happened to every corner of the city.

There was an empty space before Turun's throne. It was the place decreed by the law of his people for those who came on trial before their Elders. And he stood there.

Old Turun looked down at him with pity behind the sadness in his eyes. "You have not been helpful, Korul." he said bitterly, "but the People have been strong without you. Tell him, Karak."

Karak swaggered forward to the edge of the dais. "You've been so busy with—things—Korul," he sneered, "that I was glad to help the Elders. I've cleared up some of the little details of organization that you'd have taken care of if you'd have the time."

The blusterer had to be deflated. "What details?" Korul demanded. "What have you accomplished, that is so important?"

He had walked into Karak's trap. "Perhaps not important to you, or your new friends, Korul—but we have the sluices at both poles. Torkul is in command in the North, and Tatok in the South. I have found leaders in every city—strong leaders, without other distractions on their minds. And the People have weapons now, Korul."

"By the gods, Karak," he cried, "do you have a plan? Speak it out!"

The mockery went out of Karak's broad face. "It's very simple, Korul—and soon done. In two days the sluices will open, and the autumn flow begin. The Masters will be our equals again for one night. It's to be the last, they tell me—and it *will* be the last, but we will make it so! Every man has been drilled in his part until he dreams it. Every woman knows her duty. In three breaths they will be cut down to the last one, and there will be no blood-giving on Mur."

"And my part, Karak? You've said nothing about that."

He was being sly again. "Oh, no, Korul!" he protested. "You are our First Man—you'll give the word that frees us. You will be at the feasting, I'm sure—in a very prominent place, no doubt. When you are quite ready, and have made your farewells to the old days, you will rise and give us the word."

He was holding out something that glistened: a knife, hammered out of steel, sharpened to a needle point and razor edge, with a handle of carved bone. "Take it, Korul—and strike the first blow for your people. The blood of the First Master and all

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his breed will drip from this blade when you're done."

And Turun's croak goaded him on. "Take it, Korul. Hold it up for the People to see. Then speak to them."

Slowly Korul's fingers closed over the carved hilt. It was a sweetly, wickedly made thing—and it would kill as quickly in Karak's hand as in his. If he refused now—if he hesitated in any way—the allegiance of the Givers would be lost. Karak would be First, then—and no woman's face swam before *his* eyes.

If he agreed, then he must smile and whisper and murmur love-words to Thorana and with his next breath slit her lovely throat—or see Karak do it for him.

At least, there were two days.

Every eye in the hall was on Korul as he stepped up on the dais beside Turun, in his rightful place, where the transmitter would carry face and voice to every city of Mur.

"People of Mur," he said hoarsely, "I will give you the word. The word is—*Death!*"

Behind him he heard Karak chuckling.

In The Pit

SHE was waiting for him there in the shadow of the great open cage of the Star-Beast, as she had waited so often. She rose as she heard his footsteps and stood slim and wonderful in the soft light that sifted down through the mists of the gorge.

Korul took her hands. He could not speak, or look at her. The knife, in its secret sheathe at his side, seemed to burn into his flesh. In two nights that knife must slash across this lovely throat—must slip into this warm soft breast.

The warmth in his hands was suddenly the sticky warmth of fresh blood. Korul stepped quickly back; rubbed his open palms down his thighs.

Thorana reached out and drew him close again. "Tell me, Korul—what is it? I will not blame you."

It came pouring out then, in a flood of broken words—how he loved her—how he had betrayed her—how all her race were to be butchered at his word.

"Warn them!" he pleaded "Tell them everything. There must be some stronghold—one of the abandoned cities, perhaps—where they can hide and give me time to reason with the People."

"It is too late for reasoning, Korul," she told him. "We could not live without your people. Who would tend the heat engines? Who would prepare our food? What should we do for blood? No—some of them have known it would come. We hoped, as we

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have always hoped, that it would be a little later—not in our own lifetime, but later. Instead, it is now."

Her fingers tightened on his arms. "Be true to them, Korul. Use the knife they gave you, and be quick and kind. Then they will trust you again; they will follow you as they used to. You can lead them in the way we've dreamed here so often, and keep it all from happening again in a thousand years or two thousand when the Givers of today have in their turn become Masters, and some other crushed-down race strikes back."

He stared at her. Kill her—that was what she was asking him. Drink her blood, as she had drunk his there in the desert. "I'll go with you—now," he insisted. "We'll use the secret lifts. There are places in the upper city that not even the Elders know. They don't need me now—they've proved that. Let the Elders care for the People."

Thorana pointed to the archway through which he had come into the Pit. There were shadows there, and as one moved he caught the glint of light on bare metal. Slowly he looked around him. Every entry was guarded.

Remembering, he heard Karak's mocking chuckle.

The girl drew him down beside her on the stone bench that ran across the front of the Star Beast's cage. "We've been watched from the beginning, Korul: I thought you knew that. They know how it is with us. They knew you would betray them, to me. Karak has never intended that we would live out this night."

Korul went down on his knees at her side. How could he have been so stupid? *This* was Karak's real plan—to strike tonight. Everything was ready—the sluices taken—weapons distributed—only a word was needed, and why should that word wait for Autumn Night? No—his death, and Thorana's, here in the Pit, would be the signal for massacre.

Out of the darkness above him came a thundering voice, hoarse, savage, rasping!

"Korul!"

Korul's heart stood still. Was this some other mockery of Karak's? Gently he slipped the knife out of its hiding place and balanced it in his hand. Then it came again:

"Korul!"

SWEEPING Thorana behind him, he leaped back into the open Pit. Above them, huge and repulsive, the Star Beast clung to the bars of its cage and glared down at them with little, glittering eyes.

The thing's head and body were shaggy with tangled reddish hair. Its legs and arms were thick and

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crooked; its body squat and brutish. It had narrow, club-like feet and stubby fingers. There were little, crumpled ears half-hidden in its matted hair—flabby, slobbering lips—a nose which was a bulbous snout set between two tiny bloodshot eyes that glared palely out of the darkness. A foul animal reek came from the filth of its cage.

The Beast had come out of the desert, twenty years and more before. Thandar, Korul's father and First Man in his time, had trapped it among the high levels. They netted it, like any of the great carnivores in the Pit, and chained it—but it burst its chains and crushed its captors in its mighty arms. It ran wild in the upper city and broke into the Hall of the Masters, trampling them underfoot in its efforts to escape, beating off its pursuers with a metal shaft that it swung like a club.

Some how the thing had found its way into the maze of corridors deep under the city where the water-conduits ran. It had lurked there for ten days, eluding the search parties with animal cunning, fighting savagely when cornered. Then it burst out into the secret cells of the Searchers, and with their cunning they made a gas that brought it down.

The thing was senseless when they brought it into the Pit and built this cage around it. They found it would eat flesh, and there they left it, raging and beating at its bars and bellowing its bestial gibberish at the stars.

Star-Beast they named it. When it had grown quiet and people came to look at it, it would mouth and mutter and gesture with its fore-paws at the mists above the Pit—and when they laughed, or shrank away, it would fly into a furry and shake the bars of its cage and roar. Then the novelty wore off, and only occasional visitors came to see it—children, for the most part. When it roared and gibbered, they would mock and gibber back, and run off laughing.

The Beast grew sullen. Time and again it tried to leap on its keeper when he came with food, or to clean its cage. Finally no one would go into the cage, and it lay in its filth staring up through the mists of the gorge at the dim, haloed stars.

It had been docile enough during all the nights they had been meeting on the bench under its cage. It would pace to and fro as caged beasts do, or squat against the bars above them, staring down, listening, watching, mumbling or whining to itself. Thorana had grown fond of the thing; often she would bring food for it from the Masters' kitchens. It showed no inclination to harm her, but growled in pleasure and made half-hearted efforts to

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groom itself as other beasts do. Now it clung against the bars, huge, shaggy, monstrous, yet no longer repulsive. They were growing tolerant of life and its many forms, Korul thought, now that death was so near.

Thorana clutched his arm. "What was it?" she whispered.

"Up there, I think." Korul pointed to the lowest terrace, above them in the dark. Perhaps there are some who still consider Korul their First Man, he thought grimly. "Korul!" It came again, close to them. "Here!"

Thorana's fingers dug into his muscle. "Korul—*the Beast!* The Star Beast!"

He stared at her. "It's true," she insisted. "I was watching it. I saw its lips move!"

Korul's grip tightened on his knife. What trickery was this? Was there a hidden speaker, an eavesdropping pick-up in the cage? Was one of Karak's bullies there in the cage spying on them, disguised in the Beast's flayed pelt?

He climbed up on the stone bench and peered at the Beast through the bars. It towered over him, fully a third again his height—huge, hairy, hideous, staring at him with eyes that seemed to try to speak. And its lips moved, clumsily, spewing out blurred, uncouth sound that were somehow twisted into words:

"Korul! I—not—speak—good. I—hear. I—understand. I—sad." Then, hesitantly: "I—help!"

Gods above! Crudely, roughly, mouthing the syllables and ignoring the simplest rules of grammar, the Star Beast was speaking in the ancient language of Mur!

The Star Beast

THORANA was there beside him. "What are you?" she demanded. "How can you speak our tongue?"

"Slow. Slow," pleaded the Beast. "I—not—understand—good—too. Speak—slow. Slow."

Korul repeated what she had said.

"I—hear—you," the thing explained. "Many—days—I—hear—you—speak. I—understand—your—words. I—learn—slow. Now—I—hear—your—trouble. I—will—help."

"But—what are you?" It was Thorana again. "How can you help us?"

"Stay—here—tonight. Speak—slow. Show—me—words. Stay—tomorrow. Tell—me—all. I—tell—you. Tomorrow—night—I—help."

Weird, unnatural words from that hairy brute, caged here in the Pit as a monstrosity, tormented by children and malicious men and women. Weirder still the story that he told.

All that night and the next day they sat by the cage, talking

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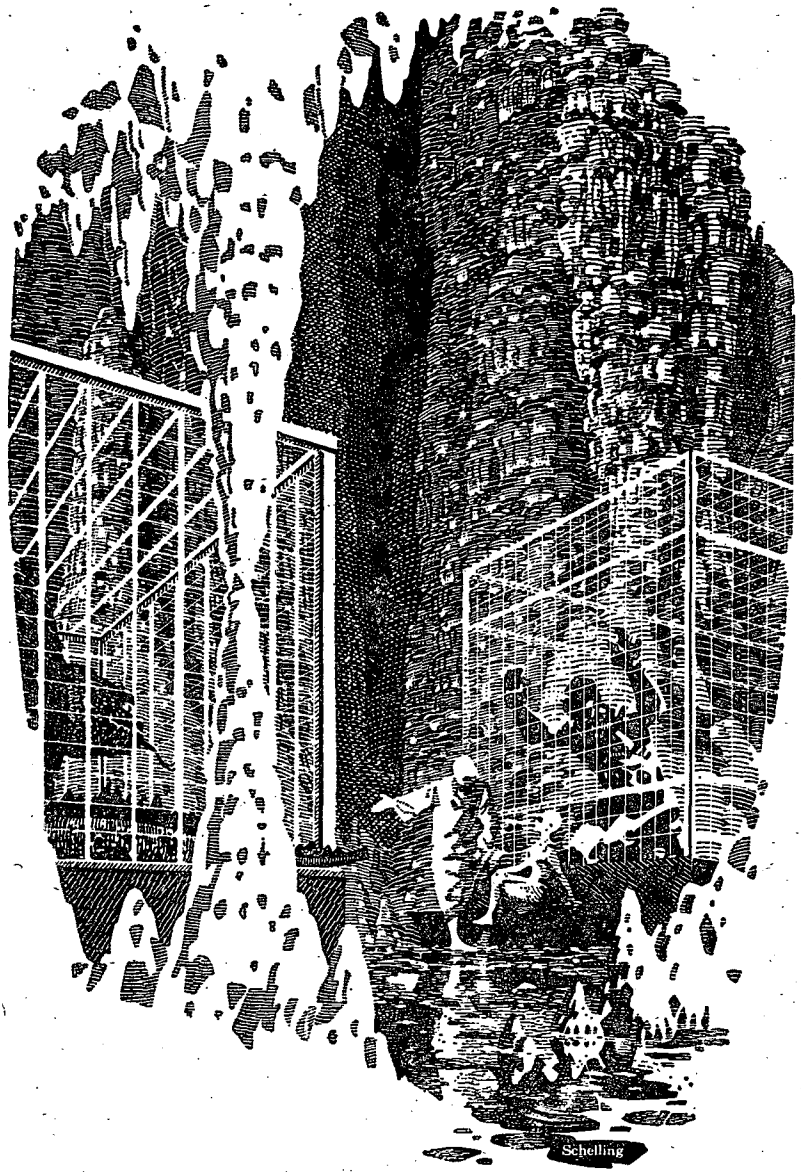

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slowly, using simple words, illustrating with gestures. The guards at the archways were puzzled, and faces peered down curiously from the terraces that encircled the Pit. Perhaps Karak did not dare attack in daylight, in the open, with the People looking on. Perhaps it was Turun who remembered his old friendship with Thandar and Thandar's son. They were not molested.

The Beast was wonderfully quick to learn. From the beginning it had tried to remember words—couple them with gestures—understand their meanings. For half a year now it had spied on Korul and Thorana almost every night. It had had twenty years to lay the foundations of the language of Mur; now, in a day, they must raise the superstructure—grammar, pronunciation, distinctions of meaning.

The thing's throat and tongue were ill-fitted for their rapid, sibilent speech. It spoke ponderously. By straining it could make the words clear, if dull and heavy as an idiot child might speak them. But this beast from the stars was no idiot!

Jim-Berk it—he—was called, in his own tongue. He had come from a world nearer the sun than Mur, in a metal shell driven by explosives. He had lived twenty of his own years then. Here on Mur—*Mars*, he called it—the years passed twice as slowly.

Jim-Berk's shell had landed safely in the low hills beyond the desert, far to the North. From his world, Searchers had been able to see the straight clefts of the gorges that criss-crossed Mur, and watch them grow green in the spring as the first vapors boiled up out of them to moisten the clinging plants along the desert's edge. Such clefts must be the work of an intelligent race, they thought, and Jim-Berk had been sent to find that race.

He started for the nearest rift and was lost in the desert. Exhausted, starved, half mad with heat and thirst, he stumbled into the upper levels of the city. Far below, from the lip of the gorge, he had seen the lights of the living levels, smelled the warm mist, heard the twitter of voices and the throb of the heat-pumps that beat through all the foundations of the city. Then he was found—a monster out of the desert. They attacked, and he fought back—and in the end was caged.

For a long time, he told them, he tried vainly to make someone understand, calling to curious sightseers in his own tongue or in what seemed to him to be theirs, flying into a blind rage when they ran away in horror from his bellowing. He tried to escape, beating at the bars, ambushing his jailer—all without avail. In the end he gave up hope

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and became the beast they thought him. Then Korul came with Thorana.

"You were young," he said painfully. "You weren't afraid like the others. You sat where I could hear you, and you talked a lot. Young people like you didn't talk so much when they were alone, on my world.

"Hearing the same voices helps when you are learning to talk. I got so I could understand a lot of what you were saying. Last night, when Korul told his story, I had to speak. On *Earth* we're more used to violence than you seem to be here on *Mars*. Maybe I can help."

WHY do you want to help, Jim-Berk?" Thorana asked. "Think how we have treated you through all these years—a beast, caged in the Pit for the curious to torment! My parents threatened me with you, and some of our young men use your name as a curse. That Erth of yours must be wonderful. Jim-Berk, to breed such as you!"

"I think so, Thorana," he rumbled softly. "Here in this cage with only the other animals for company—not even the stars at night, or a moon like Erth's—it was lonely. I used to lie back and try to look up through the mist at the bright spots where the stars would show through, and wonder if one of them was Erth, and if people there remembered me and were waiting for me to come back.

"Erth is a world you could never imagine, Thorana, you on this dry, dead ball of sand. Its deserts are rolling water, blue and green and grey, breaking against great cliffs and over white, smooth sands. Its plains are green as your eyes, Thorana, and the forests that go up over the hills are darker green, and the sky as blue—well, as blue as my own eyes used to be. And now it's only a silver speck shining in the night, with the gray mist hiding it from me. But by Erth herself, I'm forgetting you two!"

"There's nothing you can do," Korul told him. "We're trapped here, all three of us, but if Turun will speak to me I'll tell him your story. He'll let you go, I'm sure—back to your Erth, away from our bleeding and our bickering."

"Don't cackle like an old woman!" he growled. "Who is First Man in this place if you're not? Who has the key to everything? I'm no more caged than your infernal Karak, if you'll take the trouble to unlock this cage. Listen to me—will they kill you if you come out alone?"

"There's nothing you can do,"

"They might. Karak hates me, and they are his men. But he's afraid of Turun and the Elders, and I think he's been looking forward to seeing my knife in Thor-

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ana's throat. I think I could go free, for another night at least."

"Then do it, and leave Thorana here with the key. I'll promise to have her out of here in the wink of an eye, once it's dark enough. It's you they'll be watching anyway, not us. Now then, have you a map of the place anywhere?"

There was a mosaic on the floor of the Pit that showed the entire world of Mur. Thorana copied it on a bit of cloth torn from her mantle. Jim-Berk crumpled it in his big paw.

"What place is there you'll be safe?" he demanded.

"Torkul, our leader at the northern sluices, is like a brother," Korul told him. "But to him you're a wild beast, and Thorana one of the Masters whom he's sworn to kill. Besides, it is too far . . ."

"That's my affair," he snapped. "I'm big enough, I think, to take care of myself and of her too. Where are there cities, now? We must keep away from them."

KORUL pointed them out in dimming light. Jim-Berk's little eyes grew thoughtful. "Look here," he said finally. "I'll go the way I came, over the desert and through the hills—here—to where I left the ship. There'll be water there, and food, and clothes for me, though it makes little enough difference what I wear after twenty years of running naked in this *zoo* of yours! Then we'll follow the height of the land to your other rift, here, and follow it to the pole. Is that clear?"

"I can follow you," Korul assured him, "but how will you find the way? Mur is a strange world to you, and this map is no more than a scrawl copied from an artist's crude picture. There have been no surveys in the memory of man—we don't go into the desert, and haven't for centuries."

"So much the better!" he grunted. "There'll be no one there to see us. As for steering my way, there's the sun and the stars, and forty years haven't changed them beyond remembering. The skies are higher and older than you people dream, Korul. You've forgotten a lot that we on Erth never knew, perhaps, but I'll bet you were never the men for the open that we are. Little folk like you are safest close to home."

"Don't wait for me," Korul warned him. "I'll be watched for days after the—Change. Keep Thorana safe for me, and if I'm alive I will come to the sluices. I trust you, Jim-Berk."

"I'll keep her safe enough," he grinned, "and it'll give you something to come after, so you'll not forget. Unlock the cage now, and get out of here."

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The cage door locked with a combination. Korul set the key and tugged, but nothing moved. He tried again, and still again. The master combination should open the lock, but the door had not been touched for years, since Berk had killed his keeper.

Then the Star Beast grasped the bars. His rolling muscles swelled; water stood out on his hairy pelt in droplets, and dripped from the end of his snout And the door moved! He shoved it open and slipped out into the night.

"Argh!" he grunted. "It's good to smell fresh air again!"

As far as Korul could see, he had no more air than before, and as for smell. . . . But he was of a different world and another race: things would be different to him. With a squeeze of the hand he left Thorana and strode warily toward the nearest entry.

Two men with bows and arm-long knives stepped out of the shadows. "Karak wants to see you," growled one of them.

"I want to see Karak!" Korul snapped. "It has to do with the girl, Thorana. She will be kept here in the Pit, as he said. It should amuse our children to have one of the Masters caged with the other beasts. Let no one into the Pit without my word or Karak's. This woman is our affair. Now take me to Karak or Turun, quickly."

The Hunting of the Beast

BY luck, it was Turun. His old eyes narrowed as he saw Korul. Karak's plan must have been plenty definite.

"Karak or no Karak," Korul told him when the guard had left, "I am First Man of Mur until someone lets my blood. What I do and think is my affair, unless the People are harmed by it.

"I've left the girl in the Pit. She can't leave or warn the Masters, and there is no need to kill her before the signal is given. I ask that you leave her there until the killing is over. If you grant me this, I will lead as you wish, and if the Elders still say she must die, I will take her life myself. Otherwise you may do as you please—without your First. I do not trust Karak!"

Turun was on his feet in a rage. "By the gods you talk boldly for a man who has betrayed his race! Be you First or last, you have no claim on the People or their Elders now. If Karak agrees, you may lead the attack. Until then, if you wish, the girl is safe where she is. Now go away. I want to remember Thandar, and forget he had a son!"

It suited Karak to have Korul as his puppet-leader. The Elders would reward him in any way he asked, when the time came—and a thrust from behind was as quick and quiet a way of letting

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a First Man's blood as open combat. In the hubbub of killing, who would say which Master had done it?

Korul read his thoughts, and swallowed his own fury. From the Hall of Elders, Karak's grinning face behind him, he explained the plan of attack to the people—knowing all the while that it had all been done, and done thoroughly, long before, while he and Thorana were wandering through each other's dreams.

Karak was feeling his power. "Turun's growing old," he boomed, "and he can't see beyond his nose. When it's all over, and the Givers are in the Master's halls, there'll be concessions for those who have cooperated with the Elders. As I recall this Thorana, she may be worth saving. I'll look her over tomorrow." Better the knife for Thorana, if Karak was taking an interest in her. But if he knew the man, there would be other beautiful daughters of the Masters safely spirited away when the killing started.

"What news from Torkul?" he asked, to change the subject.

Karak frowned. "None," he muttered, "nor from Tatok. They struck without my order, and we have rumors that they're holding the Masters prisoner and giving them blood when they need it." He glared suspiciously at Korul. "You know them pretty well, don't you?"

"I know, Torkul. We were young together. He was headstrong and dreamy—wanted to be a Searcher. Maybe he wants to experiment with the Masters a little before he lets them die."

That thought seemed attractive to Karak. "What about Tatok?" he demanded. "Wasn't his father a friend of your father and Turun?"

Korul let his eyes shift away. If Karak could see just far enough into a ruse, but not too far . . .

"I haven't heard from Tatok in a year," he insisted. "Our fathers were friends, but I never knew him well. You know yourself the story they tell—when a spy for the Masters caught him shirking, he ran away and hid for twenty days in the deserted levels. He had food only twice before they caught him. No—Tatok is loyal enough. The Masters may have been able to cut the signal lines before he killed them."

Tatok was a blustering bully very much like Karak himself, as Korul knew very well. If he refused to answer questions, it was probably because he had no fondness for taking orders from anyone when he had power of his own. If Karak's suspicions could be turned to him, and away from Torkul, perhaps he could be kept away from the nearer pole.

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Whether the bluff had worked, Korul never knew. There was a shout in the corridor outside and a guard flung open the door. It was the man from the Pit.

"The Star Beast is loose!" he shouted. "It's got the girl!"

KARAK'S mouth hardened. He stared thoughtfully at Korul, then turned to the guard. "What happened?" he demanded. "Who's let the thing out?"

"I don't know," the man told him. "There wasn't a sound after Korul left. Then the thing showed up out of the shadows and strangled the guards at the other archway. The girl ran after him, and he picked her up and disappeared. We shot at them, but it was too dark to aim, and he was running very fast. You remember, they say that when he was captured he could jump very high and run faster than any man."

"This could be bad," Karak said slowly. "If the woman gets away, she may warn her friends and make the killing a bit messier than we'd planned. What do you suggest, Korul—find them first, or call the signal now?"

"Find them!" Korul snapped. "I've seen that thing close up. Let it run wild, and it can kill more of our men than a score of the Masters can, warned or not. Remember your history, man—what happened when it was wild and scared of us? Now it's been caged for twenty years. It hates our blood and bones, and it will hunt us down as long as we leave it alive!"

He sensed Karak puzzling over what he said. Was it a bluff? Was there some scheme afoot delaying the Change—giving the Masters time to protect themselves, or escape?

"We'll use *ullas*," Karak decided. "Whether it's gone down into the tunnels, as it did before, or headed back for the desert, they'll follow it. Zon, get three men who can handle the things and meet us in the Pit."

He wheeled to look at Korul again. "If your stomach won't stand for hunting this girl with *ullas*, perhaps you'd like to stay behind—under guard."

It would have taken more than Karak to make Korul stay behind, but he had been sure that the bully would see the irony of the situation and make him join the hunt. If he could protect Thorana, it would be there.

Zon and three like him met them with the *ullas*. There were six of the things, leashed two and two, ugly scaly things with their flat heads and frill of savage-looking spines. They were as vicious as they looked, Korul knew: men like Karak trained them to fight and hunt small creatures bred in the cages of the Pit.

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The reek of the Star Beast was strong in his cage, and the *ullas* were off like streaks on the trail. From the pit it led deep into the tunnels under the city, twisting back and forth, going ever deeper until the heat and stench of the Under-Pit was choking in their throats. Jim-Berk knew *ullas* well: he had been caged with them for two thirds of his life—but their scent was too keen for his tricks.

When the trail led to one of the secret lifts, Korul felt Karak's suspicious glare on his back. A beast using lifts?

They had no way of knowing where the lift would stop. The *ullas* were split into two packs, muzzled still, and sent to scout out every level while Karak waited in the car. It was a stupid performance, but it gave the Beast and Thorana time to hide their trail.

At the very top of the city the creatures struck a hot scent. The Star Beast had scrambled straight up the wall to the rock slope above, trying to confuse the pursuit. The hissing *ullas* hurled themselves again and again against the wall, fell back and leaped again, until Zon's men clubbed them back and dragged them hissing and struggling, to the nearest steps.

FROM the wall, Berk's trail led raggedly up through the rocks to the desert. Where his hunters squirmed and struggled through crevices and over jagged boulders twice their height, the Star Beast had climbed like a *zannak* in great, straddling leaps that carried him from block to block. Karak's temper was rising fast. He would never leave the trail now, Korul realized.

On and on they went over the swelling sand-sea of the dunes—up one great, sweeping, gentle slope, then down in a rushing slide—up again, then down. The glow of the gorge was sinking in the sky behind them when one of Zon's men stumbled and went down, dragging his *ullas* with him in a hissing, clawing tangle that rolled in a river of sand to the foot of the dune. When they reached him, he lay still, bleeding from the gashes of the monster's knife-sharp claws. They crouched over him, probing with their muzzled snouts, running out their forked tongues to lap at his oozing blood.

Karak sent him back, with a second man to help him. Zor and the remaining guard took the *ullas*. They were experienced hunters, Karak and Zor: they held their beasts to an easy, swinging pace that ate up the distance. But the great strides of the Star Beast, clear in the sand before them, measured twice their paces. The *ullas* seemed less

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eager, too: the scent must be growing cold.

Karak was no fool. The Star Beast's tracks were slowly filling with sand, with every breath of air that curled over the desert's face. He stopped them at the crest of one gigantic dune that rose above all the rest.

"You—Zor!" he demanded. "Can you follow a trail in the sand?"

"I have hunted with you," the man reminded him.

"Then let the *ullas* go, and follow as you can. We're losing ground."

Silently they bent over the straining beasts, plucking at the straps that muzzled them. Then like living shadows, the creatures leaped out on the Star Beast's scent.

"Come on!" shouted Karak, "if you want to see the kill!"

Now they were running, with a stride that nearly matched the Star Beast's —pace for pace on the track of the hunting beasts. As the darkness lightened and the dawn-cone thrust up before them, paling the watching stars, Korul saw that the character of the ground was changing and a fierce hope sprang up in him.

As the night passed they had seen the *ullas* from time to time, far ahead on the crest of some dune, skimming like shadows over the pale sand. Gradually they had drawn ahead, until Karak was following the trail of their clawed paws. Now the sand was giving way to a hard, gravelly plain, naked and flat, where the beast's claws left no trace. What marks there were in the thin dust that overlaid the ancient, sun-baked clay would be gone as the dawn-wind rose. By the gracious gods, they might escape!

With the first arc of the sun above the far horizon, Karak stopped to stare ahead over the red expanse. It sloped down like a saucer before them, but in all that great waste nothing living moved. He grunted and ran on, Korul at his side matching stride for stride.

As the sun climbed in the sky, the red plain came alive with flickering phantoms of the heat. Broad, shining lakes spread over the desert, like the seas of which Jim-Berk told, bordered with monstrous vegetable shapes. Weird, ruined cities hung against the distance, walls and towers that melted and changed as they looked and faded into a wash of crimson light.

Looking back, Korul saw the long vanished dunes hung huge and inverted in the heavens, while over them crept two black dots—Karak's men—and far behind another moving line, the reinforcements which the wounded man had sent. Then before them the plain suddenly swelled

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and rushed to meet them with awful speed, its every detail growing with incredible swiftness, cracks swollen into gorges, pebbles into phantom bolders twice their height—and caught up by the mirage, the *ullas*, running low and tirelessly on the track of their prey!

KARAK cried out and pointed: the ghost-land shivered and was gone. But somewhere out there the hunting beasts were drawing closer to Jim-Berk and to Thorana.

Slowly another shape began to take form in the red haze before them, wavering, looming in moments of mirage, sinking again, yet steadier and more solid than the ghost-shapes of the heat. Ragged arms ran out from it on either side, closing out the horizon, then began to draw together, shutting them in.

Was this another trick of the desert and the heat, Korul wondered, or was it real? He saw uncertainty growing on Karak's flat face. What were these crazy crimson towers, these shadowed crevices, these tottering spires of scarlet that flickered like tongues of solid flame against the black sky? Were they another phantom swimming in their heat-warped brain? If so, Karak saw them too.

Mirage or not, the heat in this rock-walled slot was terrible. Karak was tearing at his clothes, and his skin was beginning to redden and blister in the sun's fierce glare. Korul drew his own mantle closer about him.

The fine red dust that their plodding feet stirred up settled over them, sifting into the creases of their skin and between cloak and skin, setting their flesh on fire. Their sandals were thin: no protection for bruised and blistered feet. Remembering that other time, Korul knew what must come and hardened himself against it—but Karak ran tirelessly beside him along the wavering track of three-clawed feet. Karak was a man!

A man—yes, but a man who had loved soft things, and taken them when he found them: good food from the Masters' cupboards, wine from the Masters' flagons, women from the Master's beds. As they came out of the broken land into a place of packed white sand, white as the snow-cap at the pole, Korul saw that the other's steps were beginning to waver. His breath rasped in and out of his open mouth in great, dry sobs. Slowly Korul began to draw ahead. There was a strangled command, then a scuff of gravel and a thump as Karak fell sprawling. Korul did not look back.

He had become a machine like Karak now, tireless and unfeeling, that raced on and on along that shimmering track while the

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sun climbed higher and the white sands blazed about him with almost ponderable heat. He narrowed his eye to slits, but still the white fire burned into his brain. He felt the skin of his face tightening and cracking.

Then far ahead, where the white sands melted again into red and rose in a vast, slow wave against the inky sky, he saw the *ullas* running on the track.

Somewhere they must have lost the trail—in the soft sands, perhaps—in the broken land. They were tiring too, running slower, and a savage satisfaction woke in Korul's throat as his dazed mind cleared and the thud of his pounding feet came crisper and faster from the packed white sand.

The skimming shapes grew in his vision until he could make out every detail of their long, lithe forms, glistening with tiny scales as black as night itself.

They vanished over the crest of the first sand-wave. Korul toiled up the slope behind them. From the top he saw a distant line of red hills, the sand rolling against their base. Halfway up the next slope raced the slim black shadows of the *ullas*—and at the very crest, silhouetted for an instant before he dropped into the hollow beyond, was the Star Beast with Thorana cradled in his mighty arms!

Up that long slope, and down, and up again—the Beast, the *ullas* and Korul far behind. As he topped each reaching wave, Korul could see that the hunting beasts were gaining steadily. Their prey in sight, their great legs had taken new strength.

And the Star Beast was stumbling—slowing—*stopping!*

The Star Beast's Lair

WHERE the red sand-waves broke, against the base of the first range of hills, a flat-topped ridge ran out into the plain. With a heave of his great shoulders Jim-Berk lifted Thorana to its top, then crouched with his back against the rock, waiting.

Far behind the racing *ullas* Korul raised one trembling arm and tried to shout. The Star Beast saw him. His hand went up in a last salute; then the hunters were on him.

He had wedged his broad back into a crevice where they could not come at him from the back or sides. As the first beast sprang, his foot lashed out and caught it in the belly, hurling it back into the pack. Before he could recover, he swung a fragment of rock above his head and sent it smashing into their midst, bowling two of the brutes end over end. One lay twitching, its flat skull crushed; the other writhed with a broken spine. Then, low under

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his guard, the other four closed in.

For a moment he towered over them, his red mane and flashing eyes rising out of a heap of glittering black, then he was down and fighting for his life. One arm flung across his throat for protection, he fought them off with the other and with his feet. He lay on his back, one of them striking at his throat, the others circling for an opening. Coolly he seized the *ulla* by its skull, his blunt fingers sinking into its glassy eyes, and as it struggled back in agony he plucked it from his body and swung it, hard, against the rock.

As the other beasts closed in, Korul flung himself, knife in hand, on the back of the nearest. The keen steel ripped out the monster's throat. Then he too had his back to the rock and was fighting for his life.

Berk was on his feet again, and as the first beast leaped he reached out with his long arms and caught it under the shoulders, thrusting it away. Hissing with fury it raked him with its long hind claws until the blood ran in stripes down his chest and thighs. Grimly he turned and drove it back against the ledge. There was a horrible crunching of bones and the thing went limp in his hands. Then, shouting encouragement, he pounced on the beast that had Korul down.

The Murian had wrapped his forearm in the folds of his cloak and thrust it between the *ulla's* ravening jaws. Striking under its grasping forepaws, he was stabbing at the creature's horny belly, feeling for a vital spot between the armor-plates. Then the Star Beast had the thing by its lashing tail and swung it in a great arc around his head, crashing its life out against the rock.

Wearily Korul pushed himself to his feet. The *ulla's* fangs had cut through the thin cloak and lacerated his arm. Jim-Berk's huge hand came down on his shoulder with a hearty pat that nearly drove him to his knees again.

"You're a man, Korul!" the Star Beast boomed. "There's not one on Erth could run all day, then go for a beast like that."

Stooping, he picked up a block of stone half Korul's size and smashed the skull of the crippled thing that lay hissing with a broken back. "Dumb thing!" he muttered. "Killing is all it's ever known. It tried hard to do what it was trained for."

He turned back to Korul. "Do you think you can give blood now? The girl had more than she could take, and I had to carry her. She doesn't have the strength you Givers have."

"She should have water, too," Korul said worriedly.

"She'll have water. It's the rea-

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son we went down into the tunnels in the beginning. There's a flask up there on the rock with her, still half-full. You little people don't seem to have the need for water that we do on Erth."

LAYING Thorana in the shadow of the ledge where the heat was less, they gave her a little water and then blood until her strength came back. Scrambling to the top of the rock, Korul stared back over the dunes.

"Karak is out there," he pointed out. "By this time his men will have caught up with him, and they may have *ullas* with them. We can't stay here."

"We won't—be sure of that," the Star Beast told him grimly. "This is the way I came before, and my ship's not far away. We'll have food and shelter there, and if Karak and his *lizrds* haven't had their fill of me, there are weapons that will make 'em think again!"

Helping Thorana to her feet, Korul took her arm and stepped out of the shadow of the rock. As the sun struck him, a wave of sickness surged up through his vitals, leaving his legs weak and shaky. He took two steps, then the red haze swirled down on him and the world went black.

* * *

The hills rose high and rugged around them when Korul came to himself again. They were old and worn, their slopes gentled by time. They swayed and rocked with a smooth, jogging rhythm, and suddenly he realized that the Beast was carrying him.

By all the gods, it was shamefull! Korul, First Man of Mur, carried like a child! Jim-Berk only laughed.

"Be still about it," he said. "I'm only a beast by your standards, and on Erth we have beasts trained to carry us. You and this girl have trained me well enough. We were in a hurry, and she objected to leaving you there, so I brought you with us."

Deeper they went and deeper into the red, worn hills, following a trail that not even twenty of Mur's years had erased from Jim-Berk's memory. From time to time he would point out landmarks—an oddly shaped pinnacle of rock that was like some thing of Erth—a parti-colored cliff—the opening of a cave. Legend had it that the ancients had a sense of direction like this Erth-thing's, Korul knew, but it had long since been bred out of the race. Without Jim-Berk he and Thorana would never find their way back to the cities of their race.

At last they came to a cliff of deep red rock from which queer, lighter-colored, rounded knobs protruded.

"We'll be there in a *jifi*," Jim-Berk told them. "This is the first

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place I found after I left the *rokt*. There's many a Searcher back home on Erth would be glad of a look at those bones. Your own kind too, I've no doubt."

"What bones?" Korul demanded. "I see nothing."

"Maybe so," the Star Beast admitted, "but no race would get where yours is without knowing about fossil bones. There's no time now to fool with them, but those knobs and humps you're looking at are the dead bones of beasts that lived here before Erth had a moon, like as not, and that were buried and turned to stone. Come on, now—up through here to the top, and we'll see what there is to see."

They climbed a winding crevice in the rock to the summit of the cliff of bones. A broad plateau stretched out before them, haunted with grotesque monsters of wind-carved stone. Everywhere lay the bones, bigger than a man and strangely shaped. True enough, Korul found, some of them lay together in the shape of some gigantic *ulla* or *ganak*—but how could Jim-Berk be so sure that these things were not fantasies like the wind-shaped spires of the plain?

The Star Beast was not concerning himself with bones. As he came out of the cleft, Jim-Berk took to his heels. Seizing Thorana's hand, Korul raced after him. A moment later they rounded a spur of rock, and there in a little hollow was the ship!

There had been nothing like it in all the long history of the people of Mur, Korul thought. Or had there been a time, long ago when the races were one people, when they too had wandered among the stars?

It was long and blunt-nosed, fashioned out of steel. Terrible heat had scarred and blackened it, and pitted it like the stones that sometimes fell out of the sky. Here and there small, heavy windows were set in the steel. Jim-Berk was working at one of them. It swung open, and he squeezed through into the dark interior. For a moment the two Murians hesitated, then as bright white lights blazed from the ports they crept up to the open hatch and looked inside.

THEY looked into a room tipped over on its side. Furniture, instruments, books were tumbled together in confusion. In what was now a wall, a metal ladder disappeared into the base of the ship, where twelve huge tubular jets showed on the outside.

Tottering precariously on a metal table, Jim-Berk was fumbling with the fastening on a door set in the thickness of the ship above his head. It opened suddenly, deluging him with little metal cylinders. With a growl

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he tried another. Hanging in this compartment were a number of queer-shaped garments of coarse cloth.

"I'll be with you in a moment," he shouted. "After forty years it's a great feeling to have on a pair of *pantz* again!"

Perched on the rim of the hatchway, Korul and Thorana watched him dress. Two layers of heavy cloth covered his hairy body from head to foot. A peaked blue cap went on his head, and on his feet he tried to pull queer, stiff boxes. After forty Erth years of nakedness, his feet were beyond the wearing of these *shuz*.

A queerly human figure in his stiff, dark garments, with the little cap set on his shaggy mane and his hands plunged into pouches in the sides of his *pantz*, the Star Beast confronted his two guests.

"Well," he asked, "what do you think of me now? Less like an animal, eh? Welcome to *Terra!*"

"Terra?" Thorana questioned, puzzled.

"It's the name I gave the ship," he explained. "There are hundreds of different languages on Erth, and 'Terra' means 'Erth' in one of them. What do you call yourselves as a lot—Masters and Blood-Givers together, I mean—the whole race?"

"There is no such word in our language today," Thorana said slowly. "We haven't been so ready to admit that the two peoples came from one stock. But I have seen a word in the old books . . ."

"Murtas," Korul told him. "Sons of Mur."

"It's a good name," Berk said. "Better than we have. Erth is a world with many races and many languages, and a different name in each one. *Mankind* we say—or *men*—or *man*—for the kind of animal we all are—but it's different in every language.

"There's an old word, though, in the legends, that I've always liked. It's the name of a race of giants who were the sons of Erth. *Titans*, they were called, and there were some great men among them. One of them showed men how to make fire.

"Now that we're finding our way out here into the emptiness where the planets are, and the sun and stars, that's a name I'd be proud to have used for men and men like me. *Titan!* Sounds big and powerful, doesn't it—and that's the way we men from Erth are and always will be. Do you like it, you two—Titans? What do you say?"

"It is a good word," Thorana agreed. "Better than Star Beasts. But for yourself, we must use your own name—Jim-Berk, the Titan."

"Not the whole of it," he pleaded. "Not Jim-Berk, run together like it was a name out of the

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Good Book. Jim, my friends call me—only Jim. Will you do that?"

Little by little Jim, the Titan, managed to put the confusion of his ship into order. The two Murians were of little help. Korul was greatly interested in the apparatus with which the craft was propelled, while Thorana poured over his books. They were printed on a rough white fabric which the Titan said came from the matted fibers from the stems of the huge plants of his world. *Paypr* he called it.

Some of the books had *paypr* covers, and in them Thorana found pictures more wonderful than anything she had seen outside the musuems of the Searchers. All the teeming life and civilization of Erth was there—people like Jim, dressed as strangely and gaudily as the little creatures he called *brdz*—towering buildings of stone and steel—machines that carried hundreds of people from place to place, as their *tlornaks* carried one or two. Once there had been such machines on Mur, Thorana knew before the world grew dry and the People retreated to the gorges.

Erth was a world of beautiful strangeness to those two. They remembered what the Star Beast had told them of the seas of Erth, and here they were in truth—seas, and deep blue lakes, and rivers that carved their way through mighty forested hills that raised snow-capped crests against the sky. To Thorana it was like opening the past, for all these things had been on Mur in ancient times. She begged Jim-Berk to leave these books behind, to show to the Searchers who knew about such things.

AS the day passed, Korul was sure that Karak must have turned back or lost their trail. Autumn Night had come and gone: had the Change come with it? Were the Masters only an ugly memory now, on all the face of Mur, save only here in the Star Beast's lair where Thorana lived and regained her strength?

They would know soon.

Jim's *rokt* had to be made ready for his return to Erth. With spades and powerful explosives they opened a pit under its base and toppled it in until the ship stood upright, its open hatchway at the level of the ground. Across the mountains, only a short distance away, was the second gorge. Now that the sluices had been opened there should be water there. While Korul and Thorana kept watch at the *rokt*, Jim-Berk set out across the plateau to the east. A day later he was back, flasks of water slung all around him, with the news that the gorge-city was deserted.

After six days Jim had enough

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water to fill his empty reservoirs. He would never let Korul or Thorana accompany him. What he found in the abandoned city he did not say, nor did they ask him.

The books from Erth were a never ending source of fascination to Thorana. Jim showed them the key to his written language: twenty-six symbols which stood for twenty-six sounds in the tongue his people spoke. The same symbols, he said, could be used to write down the languages of other peoples, though not always as exactly as they would like. Some of them had symbols of their own. He drew a few from memory that seemed no more and no less arbitrary than the ones in which the books were written.

Thorana soon learned the sounds of these twenty-six symbols. She liked to sound out the words under the pictures, while Jim-Berk gave her the meanings in her own tongue. In a little time she was able to talk to him in his own rough *Inglis*.

Korful felt much neglected during these little colloquies. He would see a broad grin creeping over Jim-Berk's bearded face as he listened to Thorana stumbling through one of his uncouth phrases, then the Titan would burst into a great roar of laughter that rocked the ship and call her some outlandish name in his own tongue that brought the blood to the girl's face in confusion. Or they would talk about him—Korul—both of them laughing, until he brought the fire to Thorana's eyes and Jim-Berk's thunderous laughter roaring through the ship by using the secret code-talk of the Elders.

Thorana seemed content to ignore the revolt and what might be happening across the mountains and the desert, in the gorge cities of her people. Family ties meant very little to the Masters, except as an index of social position, and the girl had been a monster to most of her kind. Such children, Korul knew, were often killed at birth to save their parents from embarrassment when they grew up with legs and the other stigmata of atavism.

It was a pleasant life, there in the Titan's sky-ship, but it could not last. Berk and Thorana worked over the books and diagrams which told him when he must leave Mur. He brought out a small telescope, such as some of the Searchers had, and showed them Erth, his planet, a silvery, shadowed crescent against the night. Erth was Ulra—star and goddess of love to all the generations of Mur, Masters and Givers alike. To Korul it seemed an omen for good.

When the Erth crescent was of such-and-such a thinness Jim-Berk must leave Mur, they decided. That would be very soon. And he knew, as they knew, that

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without his help they would never reach the pole alone.

The books and instruments which he would not need were hidden in a crevice near the ship, where Korul could find them again. Food and water for five days were put into Berk's big pack. He wanted the Murtas to carry no more than their own weight, or at most a little water. They would travel fastest that way, he assured Korul.

A few days before they were to leave, he gave Thorana blood again. She objected, but Jim-Berk insisted. She would need all the strength her woman's body could hold.

The Polar Sluices

JIM-BERK seemed to know the way, and the going was easy after they left the hills. They went down to the nearer gorge, along the route he had followed in getting water. An ancient road followed the edge of the crevice from city to empty city, straight to the polar sluiceways. By common consent, they did not go down into the cities except at night, when they went far enough into the empty upper levels to protect themselves from the cold.

"It's an end to fighting that both our worlds need most, Korul," the Titan said wistfully one night. "With this trouble of yours done and over, and young men and thinkers making good laws to replace the bad old ones, Mur can dig up what it has forgotten and fit it to the little bit of news that I've left you. You'll be a great, wise planet as we've always dreamed of you back on Erth. Not that you're not good enough for me as you are, but there's a lot you can learn and be the better for it.

"Then some day you'll see us dropping out of the sky again—me or my sons or their sons—real men you can talk to, and trust, like you do me. There'll be the two of you here to spread the word about us, and I'll do as much for you back on Erth. This time there'll be no cages, and in no time at all there'll be great ships coming and going like bees between us, carrying the richness and sweetness of the one world to the other.

"Ah, the star-gazers I've known in my life that would give their souls and the taxpayers' riches a dozen times over for one of your clear, bright nights—and there'll be poets and painters among you who have longed down through the years for the rumble of the sea-waves on the rocks or the singing of the wind high up in the tall pines. Ah, there's a thousand things will bring them flocking down out of the skies to you, and you to us! It's the dream that was in my head all the

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years ago—and now I'm going back again, to see human faces and hear human voices, and to be under a blue sky with a bit of green under my feet."

"There will be someone waiting for you on Erth, Jim-Berk?" Thorana asked gently.

"After forty years? Small chance of that. I had a father and a mother there who thought me wild and a bit mad, and a girl who was sure I was touched in the head. For all that, they were mine and they'd wait and watch for me for a year, or maybe five—but then the days would come creeping on, and the hope in them would begin to fade.

"The girl would go first, I'm thinking. She was a sensible piece, for all she'd taken up with me, and she could have her choice of the men once she'd made up her mind it was thing to do. As for the others—well, what's twenty of your years are close to forty back on Erth, and it's not likely they'll be alive. You've taken good care of me in your infernal cage, and the years have laid a light hand on me here, but better than sixty years is good living for one of our race on Erth.

"No, Thorana, there'll be no one to welcome me as close as you two are, but they'll be my own kind. I'll see to them, and you see to your own breed here so that when my grandchildren and yours meet again out there in the desert, there'll be no nonsense of Sky Beasts and cages between them!"

AS the days followed the nights, the road climbed above the rift-line and went winding through the low hills which closed in the polar basin. It came out at last high on a bare hillside, and there before them were the great dams and the ice.

Only scattered white patches of upland snow were left where the polar cap had been lying across the dark hills like the clouds of Erth that were in Jim's book. At their base was the dark network of swampland, green with new life, and far below where the waters reached the plain was the black line of the dam.

When the ancients knew that water and air were leaving Mur, they built their chain of dams at either pole to hold back the water of the melting frosts until, through the great sluices that run deep under the gorges, they could be pumped to every part of the dying planet. Korul remembered it as a place of solemn stillness, brooding with the lost wisdom of the past—but now the curving wall of the giant dam was swarming with the tiny black shapes of men, and steel flickered in the autumn sunlight. A dark wave surged up and

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broke against the breast of the dam, rose halfway to its crest, then dropped away as a net of shimmering silver wavered over it.

It was war!

Jim-Berk came out of his revery. "What's happening?" he demanded.

Korul told him. "Torkul, who keeps the sluices, is my friend. We wanted to bring back the old ways gently, with the help of the Searchers—not by killing and hate. And Karak is no man to stand differences of opinion among his leaders."

"With Torkul holding the gates, Mur will go without water for half a year if he chooses," Thorana pointed out. "If Tatok is with him, in the South, and Karak cannot break their defense, they hold Mur in the hollow of their palm."

"If your Torkul has the men and the will, he can hold that wall against an army," the Titan said. "Korul—if you're with him, and Karak knows it, there'll be more of the fear of the Lord in his black heart. Have you been here? How does the land lie?"

Korul pointed. "The plain is a maze of shallow gullies and ravines. You can see them as dark lines against the red, because the water follows them and plants grow there. They should give me cover enough to creep up in Karak's rear, then run for the dam when he next attacks."

"And be picked off by Torkul's best bowman, I have no doubt," the Titan said grimly. "Is there any signal that will let them know who you are?"

"By the gods, there is! Torkul and I used a cry when we were boys together that made the levels ring. 'Mur! Murata! *Mur!*" Gods, how the Masters hated it He'll know it still."

"Come on then," the giant rumbled. "Keep to cover, and when I shout, run for the dam."

Thorana seized his sleeve. "Wait!" she cried. "You can't go with us! We may be penned up there for days, and you have barely time to get back to your ship. We owe you enough now, Jim-Berk—go back to Erth while you still can. This is our affair."

He shook her gently off. "But for that little tussle with the *ullas*, I've not had a good fight for upwards of forty years," he said grandly. "I owe your friend Karak something from all three of us, and I have a little toy here at my hip that may come as a surprise to him. If it's the ship that's bothering you, it's well hidden and another year more or less won't matter to it. I'd like to see what your scientists make of me, anyway, now they know what they're looking at. Come on—if we wait much longer the sun will be down on us, and a day wasted is a day lost."

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THE sun was well down in the west when they crept up through the scarred plain behind Karak's camp. All day they had been hammering the wall with those savage attacks, trying by brute force to break through Torkul's defense. Now they were gathering for what would be a last attack before night closed down and they took cover from the cold.

Karak himself led them. Peering from behind a pinnacle of crumbling clay, Korul decided that he looked less omnipotent than on the day when he had begged for Thorana's life. He was ranging back and forth among his men, bunching them into some sort of order. As the ranks took shape, his plan became evident. Swordsmen would charge under a barrage of arrows, and the bowmen would attack when the first wave fell back.

And then—they.

The gabble of Karak's forces faded away into deathly stillness, then with a shout the big man leaped forward toward the dam. With the twang of steel cross-bows behind them and the whistle of bolts over their heads, his swordsmen sprang after him.

It was as though two waves flowed together. Down from the top of the dam came Torkul's men to meet the advancing swordsmen. A little above the center they met with a clang of steel. The thin line of defenders held, perched on the sheer face where Karak's men must claw their way upward block by block. They held, then the attackers broke and fled—and at Karak's shout, out of the gullies poured his bowmen, their squat bows hurling buzzing death at the men who stood in a huddled mass halfway up the face of the great dam.

Up the black wall, striking a shower of fire from the stone, beat the hail of steel bolts, with Torkul's line retreating slowly before it. Higher they were driven—higher—then with a shout the bowmen drew their swords, and at the same moment Torkul and his men fell flat against the rock-face, while over them hurtled a barrage of flickering steel from hidden archers at the crest.

The black wave faltered—slowed—and tumbled back in wild confusion while Torkul and his swordsmen leaped behind them bringing quick death to the laggards. And at Jim-Berk's cry the three sprang from their shelter and raced towards the milling host.

One of the fugitives saw them, pounding through the half-light, and recognized the Titan's giant shape.

"The Beast!" he screamed. "The Beast!"

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A startled hush fell over the fighters; then out of it came the Titan's roaring voice, thundering their battle-cry: "Mur! Murata! *Mur!*"

Korul's voice echoed it, and Thorana's shrilled above them both. And from where Torkul's men stood, puzzled, at the dam-front the answer came:

"Mur! *Mur!* MUR!"

Then they were at them.

IN the Titan's hand appeared a squat weapon of blued steel with a stubby muzzle. As Karak's men turned on them, it roared with a battering death that tore into their bodies and sent them reeling out of the path. Into the gap raced the Titan, Korul behind him with Thorana close at his back. Then as Karak's howl of rage went up, they closed in with ready swords on every side.

There is a saying among the Givers: A dead man's sword will make more dead men. Korul and Thorana armed themselves, and as the Titan's weapon failed and he began to push new projectiles into its magazine, they raised a shield of darting steel behind him. Then the *gun* roared again over their heads, and Karak's men fell back.

They could not go far. The weight of rushing men behind them drove them on. Unable to retreat, they had to fight. With a shout of rage the Titan scooped up the two Murians, one under each arm, and plunged headlong at the line of steel that separated them from the dam.

The utter fury of it took them through. Torkul's defenders closed in around them, but hot on their heels pounded Karak's howling, cursing host in one irresistible bolt of certain death.

Over the din thundered the Star Beast's voice: "Run! Up the dam if you like your life!"

And they ran, Jim-Berk clambering ponderously after them. They reached the line of the first stand, passed it, spilled over Torkul's barricades into a clamoring host that at Torkul's word sprang to their places and loosed a hail of steel on the attackers.

Korul looked around him. The Titan was not there!

His cry checked the bowmen and brought Torkul to his side at the top of the barricade. Halfway down the slope Jim-Berk was holding Karak's wedge of steel.

He had stopped behind the line of dead. Piling their bodies into a human breastwork, he loaded his weapon—then was up again, gigantic in the twilight, flame spitting from his roaring death-flail, crumpling them up in agony, choking the narrow ledges of the dam-face with lifeless bodies. Close-packed as they were, one of his projectiles tore through body after body, bring-

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ing them down in swaths.

Three times he rose and drove them back. The fourth time his *gun* roared twice and stopped. He hurled it in their faces, then dropped on his haunches behind his well of dead while over him sang the steel hail of Karak's bows, sweeping the rock face and cutting off his retreat.

There in the shelter of the dead Jim-Berk garnered a sheaf of swords. Again they rushed the dam, and as Karak's barrage lifted to let them through he sprang to his feet and with deadly accuracy hurled them, one by one, into the faces of the attacking men. Ten men he brought down, spitted by ten swords: the last he kept, and with it charged down the dam-face at the climbing foe.

HE was a giant, and his sword seemed to blaze with the white fire of Death itself, but they outnumbered him by hundreds. Thorana was screaming in his own strange tongue, and his own voice roared back in gleeful laughter. Snatching a sword, Korul was over the top of the dam, Torkul at his side, the defenders screaming after them.

They were too late. Streaming, panic-striken, Karak's men broke and fled from the attack of the Star Thing, with the Titan, a bloody, grinning spectre of destruction at their heels. Behind them Karak stood with his bowmen, and as his swordsmen broke they swept the slope with a hail of death that beat fiercely about the giant figure of the Titan.

They saw the blood spurt where the heavy bolts plowed into his body. They saw his massive frame quiver as each bolt struck. But still he laughed, and still the momentum of his charge carried him after the fleeing swordsmen, slashing at them with a sword that ran red to the hilt.

Thorana screamed. The Titan's charge had stopped. He stood towering over the frightened faces of Karak's bowmen, then slowly, like a falling monolith, he went down among them, dead.

They ran. Korul and Torkul left them scattered over the plain, hiding like rats in the gullies, shivering in the deepening night. As the cold deepened they crept out, whimpering for mercy, and got it or the sword according to the humor of the guard whom they approached.

Karak had escaped. His own men told how he had run from the last wild charge of the dying Star Beast. They would help hunt him down. The fear of the Titan, and the memory of his awful laughter, lay on them like death.

They carried him back to the shelter of Torkul's barricade, his bearded lips still grinning at the

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sky where Ulra—his Erth—swam bright and clear among the cold, far stars. They watched beside him through the night, as was the old custom, while the greater moon of Mur rose out of the dying sky-glow and raced in silent fear across the wan river of the galaxy.

Above the black wall of the hills, a meteor burned and went out. Thorana snuggled close to Korul's side.

"That should have been he," she murmured. "Jim-Berk, going home to the Erth he loved. We must have been monsters to him, Korul as he was to us. How did he see us—dwarfed, hairless, saucer-eyed, hideous things out of a fevered dream. But he, the Star Beast whom we mocked and imprisoned and tormented for more than half his life, saw us and understood. He could have gone back, but he stayed to help us. We must be like that, Korul, when the new race grows strong. We must be ready when the Titans come again in their starships.

"They may have forgotten you on Erth. Jim-Berk, as you said they would. But Mur remembers you, and the people—the one People—of Mur will build truth into your dream. If they do not come to us, then some day we will go to Erth.

"How did he say it, Korul? 'Flocking down out of the skies to you—and you to us.' That is how it must be, for the Titan's sake."

THE END

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A love of death, a love of darkness. That had been her whole thrill-seeking life. Now, would she find what she wanted. . . .

BEHIND THE DOOR

By JACK SHARKEY

Illustrator SUMMERS

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THE party had long been growing dull for her when Miriam first saw him, in the curving shadow of the marble staircase in the entrance foyer, politely assisting Karen Allenby out of her ermine stole. Miriam had never particularly liked Karen—and was absolutely positive she had not invited her—but the greeting she extended, rushing open-armed toward the small, plumpish blonde, was effusive in the extreme. "*So* glad you could make it! . . . Thought you'd *never* arrive . . . Been waiting for *ages*. . . ," until the other woman, her face a mingled mask of perplexity and pleased surprise, was babbling hasty introductions, and Miriam finally saw him face to face.

"But he's charming!" she was saying over her shoulder to Karen, keeping her hand snugly inside the polite clasp of his gloved fingers and her eyes boring deep into his own. "Where did you ever find him?!"

Karen, flustered at all the attention, murmured something about mutual friends, but Miriam was hardly listening as, with neat ambidexterity, she waved Karen on into the ballroom with one arm and commandeered Karen's escort with a swift motion of the other. Karen, momentarily miffed as she abruptly realized the reason behind the other's warm reception, still had the good grace and sense not to make an issue of it. Escorts were not hard to come by; invitations to Miriam Ivers' parties were.

With a bare-faced lie—"I see Charles over there!"—and a careless prognostication—"I'll see you both in a moment."—Karen resigned herself to being manless for the few minutes it would take her to charm some other hapless female free of her own partner, and hurried off to join the guests, in the brightly lit ballroom of the Ivers' mansion.

MIRIAM, still standing in the foyer with her arm linked firmly through that of the man, smiled up at him and asked, "Shall we join the others?" Something in her inflection made the phrase a genuine query rather than a polite suggestion.

"I think not," he said, a briefly discerning smile just touching the outer corners of his lips. "But where else can we go?" His glance about the foyer seemed to say that, large as Miriam's house was, she had more than enough guests in it to make prolonged privacy a grim unlikelihood. "*Is* there really a place where two people can have an uninterrupted conversation?"

Miriam, though trembling slightly in his presence, carried the game a step further. "Are you so certain I want to *be* alone with you?"

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"If you don't," he said, "I can always rejoin Karen."

A bit annoyed at having to drop pretenses, but somehow pleased that he'd seen so quickly through them, Miriam took an even firmer grip upon his arm. "Just you try and get away," she said. Then, "There is a place we can go. And we won't be disturbed."

Moving across the foyer at right angles to the ballroom entrance, Miriam drew him down a short corridor and stopped before a thick, dark-stained oaken door. She reached inside the bosom of her dress and withdrew a stout iron key on the end of a strong silver chain. He raised an eyebrow at the heavy bulk of the key, but Miriam laughed off his amusement with a blithe shrug.

"I think a key is a reflection of the strength of its lock," she said, simply, turning the key in the slot beneath the door handle. "Something in platinum, perhaps, with a delicate filagree in its design, would be more feminine, I suppose. But then I'd always be concerned about the security of—" She stopped speaking as the key turned the bolt, and replaced it within her gown.

"Of?" he prompted, feeling that the question was expected of him.

"Come and see," she said, turning the handle and going through the doorway. It was dark inside the chamber, and only when he was once more beside her, and the door closed and fastened with a triple series of steel bolts, did she flick the lights on.

Her companion looked slowly around the room, seeing the room itself, first, not its contents. "There are no windows," he observed.

"I should hope not," said Miriam. "Other than myself, you are the first person to enter these premises."

"Not even the builders?" he said, mockingly.

"Them, of course," Miriam said, with brief irritation. "But at that time, these were only rooms. They had not yet been—filled."

"The contents must be strange."

"Come and see," she said, once again, and took his gloved hand to lead him forward. Then she lifted his hand before her face, and said, fighting the tremor in her voice, "Some of the things may be dusty. You'd—You'd better remove your gloves."

HE locked eyes with her, then, his gaze mocking and unwavering, he began to comply. Only when he was through could Miriam pull her gaze from his own and look at his strong, firm-fleshed bronze hands. She reached for them, tentatively,

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then impulsively clasped them with her own.

"They're cold," she said. "Cold as death."

"The night has not been a warm one," he replied.

"No," she said, turning away to hide her triumphant smile from his piercing gaze. "It hasn't. But come and see the exhibits." She started across the floor. "You might say that the story of my life was in these rooms, in the form of souvenirs."

In the first of the rooms, the things on display were of a relatively mild order. A loving cup, won by Miriam in a sky-diving meet of parachutists at the age of nineteen. In a glass case, a headlight and part of a snapped steering wheel: "When I was twenty, I tried auto-racing. These are the only pieces left untouched by the crash and fire that nearly cost me my life, and—" She touched another cup. "—this was the reward of my efforts."

He nodded silently, and she led him on through the room and its silent exhibits. A face-mask and fins, in another case below the stuffed and mounted head of a mako shark, told their own story. As did the rifles in their rack beside the magnificent head of a tiger, and the razor-edged knife mounted in juxtaposition to a photograph of Miriam, scratched, bleeding, muddy and exultant, standing in a bathing suit beside the body of a fifteen-foot crocodile.

Pointing to the photograph, she said, "It was too large to have on exhibit here. I settled for the teeth and claws." She pulled open a drawer, removed a box covered and lined with red satin, and opened it to give proof to her statement. Again her companion nodded silently. Then, as she put the box away again, he spoke.

"You apparently live for danger, for new experience."

"This," she said, "is only the half of it." Suddenly dismissing the rest of the displays, similar in kind to those already seen, she led him through a draped archway into the next of the rooms. Here his eyes widened, and a flicker of real surprise moved across his erstwhile impassive features for a fraction of a moment. "You *have* been restless!" he said, with solemn appreciation.

Miriam watched his face, watched his eyes roaming over the exhibits as she spoke. "I find that even *these* activities palled upon me, after a while. I've hunted heads with the Jivaro, I've tasted human flesh and found it good to eat, I've taken parts in pageants and rituals that would make pagan Rome turn away in terror and disgust. Are you surprised?"

For the first time since entering the second of the rooms, he

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looked directly at her. "No," he said. "I'm not. And I don't think you expected me to be."

Miriam smiled then, a smile of relief that was oddly tangled with an emotion of heart-pounding fear and anticipation, then gripped his icy fingers and led him through another draped archway into the third and final room.

YOU astonish me, Miss Ivers," he said, coming to a halt just within the other room.

"How so?" she asked, moving softly to his side, her footsteps muffled by the heavy oriental carpet.

"This room," he said, throwing out one arm in a sweeping gesture that ended with him facing her again. "The velvet hangings edged in gold, the crystal chandeliers, those bizarre bronze incense-burners— All quite exotically beautiful, yet . . . Anticlimactic, after the foregoing chambers."

"This room," she said, her heart pounding wildly, "has been designed to witness scenes beside which all the events reflected in those first two rooms would pale." A shrewd smile played upon her lips, then, and she did not repress it. She stepped to the small chrome-and-formica bar and began to fill a glass. She filled only one, and took a deep draught of it before facing him again. "I hope," she said, with a flare of courage, "that you don't absolutely *need* squalor? I'd hate to think your existence really depended upon dreary candlelit places, choked with the smell of mold, and noisy with scurrying rats with hot bloodshot eyes?" When he did not immediately reply, she added, "Surely Bram Stoker did not exaggerate?"

His bronzed hands rose and took her slim shoulders. They felt like soft curves of ice upon her flesh. Miriam suddenly lifted the glass and finished her drink, her body tense and trembling as she felt his eyes upon the alabaster curve of her throat. And still he did not speak.

"Well?" she said huskily. "Here I am. Alone with you in this room. The hangings would muffle any outcry I might make. I am completely at your mercy . . ." Her heart's steady pounding was becoming painful, and her breath was drawn by an effort through dry, parted lips.

He continued only to stare, however, and kept only his light grip upon her shoulders as he said, "Miss Ivers, I have the distinct feeling that *were* I to 'do' anything, you would not *make* that outcry."

"What do you think?" she said, matching his burning gaze with unwinking eyes. "Why don't you . . . try. . . ?"

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HE suddenly let his arms drop to his sides and yawned. "Perhaps it is your very compliance that puts me off," he said, dropping into a large armchair and dangling one leg casually over the side, swinging his foot almost lackadaisically. "Are you in any rush?"

"Please," she said, all the hauteur gone from her voice as she sank down beside him and insinuated herself into his reluctant embrace. "You can't refuse me. Not now! You don't know the effort, the agony it cost me to go up and take you from Karen, tonight. I knew what you were then —almost—and I wanted to go to you, but I was afraid . . . I—I still am afraid. But willing."

He studied her features emotionlessly, then said, "You seem to have overcome that siege of dread admirably."

She shivered in his arms. "I had. I really had, until—"

"Until?" he asked, with a slow, lazy smile.

"Until I realized you were toying with me. All along, you've *known* what I wanted. And yet, you continually say and do things to tease me, to prolong my anticipation of what is to come."

"Are you *sure* it is to come?" he said, doing the very thing of which he was being accused.

"Oh, please stop!" she begged. "It took a terrible effort of will to bring you here. But when you mock me, I start to lose my nerve, to become afraid again."

"Then do you really think you should sit so close?"

"When one is afraid," Miriam said slowly, "one must cling to something. Even to the thing one fears most."

He considered this, then said, "Shall I tell you a part of the reason I am 'playing' in this manner?" She nodded, afraid to speak. "Because your conduct fascinates me. I have had to work long, hard hours to claim most of my victims. And yet, you practically jump into my lap—*literally* jump into my lap—with an almost direct demand that I sink my fangs into that slender throat. Why?"

Miriam spoke quietly, with returning calm. "Do you know what necrophilia is?"

"Love of death, darkness, horror," he said, nodding.

Miriam tilted her head slightly toward the preceding two chambers. "Long ago, the ordinary excitements of life palled on me. I sought escape into the extraordinary, into that seldom-heard-of world of crawling mists, incantations, and creatures who seemed like normal people but were not."

"And seeking, what did you find?" he asked, interested.

"Old wives' tales!" Miriam's smile was bitter. "Castles haunted by nothing but perilously crumbling stonework and far too

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many vermin. There was a hypnotist once—I thought I'd actually found my way beyond the Barrier, but—it was all trickery, illusion! But then, tonight, there *you* were . . ."

He stared at her, quizzically. "And you desire. . . ?"

She spoke swiftly, fearful of the results of her own words. "To shun the sunlight, to be of the undead. To sleep by day, to walk by night, my only sustenance the blood of the living, while I go on eternally neither of the living nor the dead." She clutched at him, her hands finding the sides of his face and holding his gaze to meet her own, her eyes wide and apprehensive. "Tell me it can be done! Or is that all a lie, too? Do not they who die of the vampire's bite become vampires themselves? Oh, tell me it's true, please!"

HE smiled his reassurance. "It is quite true," She sighed and relaxed in his arms, her head against his chest, her hair a gleaming cascade across his white shirtfront. "But I must know something, before I do anything," he said earnestly.

She looked at him questioningly.

"Tonight," he said, "you looked at me, and you knew I was different. How? Where did I go wrong?"

She laughed almost airily, surprised at her own mirth. "There were certain signs. Nothing you need worry about, though. With years of looking for someone such as you, I've become a bit sensitized, I imagine."

"What signs?" he persisted intently.

"Well, of course, those *teeth* of yours!" she said, chidingly. "As you took Karen's wrap, you smiled. She didn't see; I did. Your canines extend at least half an inch lower than your other teeth. Like—" She found herself giving an inane giggle. "Like an unveiled portcullis!"

"What else?" he said, his eyes half-lidded and sleepy.

"Your eyes. They see too deeply into one's own. And there's a strangeness in them, an unearthly appetite that I immediately equated with feelings I've had, myself. But I wasn't sure, really sure, until I touched your hands. There is no warmth in them, none at all. Though I *was* a bit surprised at the healthy tone of your skin. For a creature that shuns daylight, you're magnificently bronzed."

"Heredity," he said, dismissing it with a shrug. "My lineal ancestors have always been dark-skinned. The mere shift from normal life into the life I now lead does not remove all former physical traits." His voice was lulling, crooning. It made her head spin to listen to him. His

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words were reaching Miriam in a grey limbo through which she felt herself sinking, giddily.

"I didn't know," she murmurred, her eyes nearly closed, "that people were so dark in the Balkans."

"I am not from the Balkans," he said softly. "My origin is further to the east, in Nepal."

The last word stirred some spark within Miriam, a spark that brought her to full awareness with a sharp pang of fright. "Who—What are you?" she said, realizing even as she spoke that his arms were holding her rigidly prisoner.

"Haven't you guessed?" he said. "What other creature do you know that has fangs, cold blood—and toys and teases before striking?"

And in one terrible flash of memory, Miriam knew. Her mouth was opening to cry out, then the sound stopped in her lungs as she saw the sides of his throat bulge and distend like a hideous goiter, while his hollow fangs descended into her pulsing throat and released their burning venom.

"A cobra," her mind kept screaming at her, "he's a cobra!" But Miriam had been correct in at least one thing. The velvet hangings of the room were more than sufficient to muffle her ultimate shriek of agony.

THE END

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the Mynah Matter

By LAWRENCE EISENBERG

Illustrator SUMMERS

What was the secret of Fothergill's mysterious pet shop?

Who was Sidney?

For that matter, who was Fothergill?

And where were you on the night of January 13?

IT was a rude shock to find that Fothergill, proprietor of the Fothergill Pet Shop, would not sell any of his little beasts.

"I must have the Mynah bird," I told him.

He sighed distractedly and patted the rounded bulge of his waistcoat almost automatically.

"I have told you before, and I must reluctantly reiterate that Sidney is *not* for sale," he said softly, almost inaudibly.

"Confound it, man," I cried. "What sort of establishment do you run here?" I was quite close to the breaking point.

My own bird, Cyril, had died but a fortnight earlier, and I desperately missed the cheery raucous quality of his greeting. It was essential that I replace him for the sake of my own psychological well being. And of course, good talking Mynahs are not that easily come by

I had kept an eye on Sidney for some time. He was not only an eloquent speaker but he sang, too. (In an atonal fashion to be sure, but the tune was recognizable).

"My daddy was a Mynah," he would croak in his strident voice, and I could feel my hairs at the nape of the neck stand straight out.

I persisted. Fothergill was absolutely immovable, beating off all of my blandishments and resisting every monetary offer I put forward. I had as a matter of fact, hinted, one ghastly evening, that I might pay the outrageous sum of 100 pounds for Sidney and he had silently, (his complexion a frightening chalk white), shaken his head, "No."

In desperation I sought out his landlord, Emil Esterhazy, a

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predatory Hungarian who was the living embodiment of the homily, "with a Hungarian for a friend, you don't need enemies." Emil had once taught me the game of Klabyash, a freebooter's card game which had ever after cost me oodles of cash.

"Emil," I said to him after dropping fifteen successive rounds, "does Fothergill meet his rent bill punctually?"

Emil's close set eyes peered at me wryly.

"An odd and also a nosy question you ask of me. What business is this of yours?"

I flushed.

"Its nothing," I stammered. "Its only that I can't get him to sell one of his blasted birds. And I'm ready to go a fabulous price for the nasty creature."

Emil chuckled.

"Of course," he said. "Fothergill doesn't sell any of his animals. He keeps them all."

My jaw dropped.

"You're jesting," I cried.

"He keeps them," repeated Emil. "He has never yet sold a single one of his god damned pets and never will."

I put down my cards.

But Emil would offer no further information beyond that. Klabyash, yes, Fothergill, no.

I WAS a man obsessed thereafter. I found myself constantly re-examining this question at the oddest of times. I am a customer's man at the Cammerleight Brokerage house, and I must be in firm possession of my wits in order to fleece some of the canny speculators I deal with. But I would often lose the thread of my most cogent arguments at the least propitious moment as the spectre of Fothergill's ashen face would swim into my mind, shaking me an unchanging no.

My commissions dwindled and old Cammerleight himself came round to chivy me, noting acidly that the widows and orphans were beginning to best me.

There was nothing for it. I resolutely took to shadowing Fothergill in my free time, determined to run down this disturbing puzzle. I followed Fothergill to the Seedman where he purchased inordinate quantities of Sunflower seed and sundry other desirable comestibles. He purchased lavish quantities of grit, and even a case of Bird Tummy, a powerful aviate laxative.

After three fruitless weeks of shadowing Fothergill, I was close to the end of my tether. And then success caught my coat tail. I had lingered beneath an Apothecary's awning one afternoon, as Fothergill turned the corner. And then suddenly he was upon me. Fothergill, I mean, his white lips trembling and his eyes blazing anger.

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"Why are you following me," he demanded.

I stammered a silly statement re the coincidences of life which he greeted with a cold sneer. I stared down at my boot tips rather stolidly, unable to come up with something better.

"Is it Sidney?" he cried at last. "Does he mean that much to you?"

I looked up, my eyes wet with tears.

"Blast it Fothergill," I said, "it *is* Sidney. And he means more to me than you could possibly gather. I'm lonely and dispirited and Sidney would end this hideous single existence for me."

"But you don't understand," Fothergill cried. "He's so much more than a silly little bird." He stopped abruptly. "But of course," he muttered, "you couldn't possibly understand."

He took hold of my arm and almost dragged me along, finally stopping at a small coffee shop in a barren section of Dulwich, a London suburb.

HE purchased two coffees, despite my fevered attempt to order tea, and he spooned sugar into both cups in an almost unending stream.

He peered at me intently all the while, searching out every line of my features as if he wanted to see the contours of my soul. At length he spoke out.

"You are Eton, aren't you." I nodded assent.

"Then you are aware of the teachings of Pythagoras," he resumed. "Particularly, the doctrine of reincarnation.

"Reincarnation?" I said.

"The soul," said Fothergill, "is reborn several times in other physical manifestations, and of course is purified by living a life of rectitude. Each such successive purification brings the soul closer to the perfect, the Universal Soul."

I glanced about, hopeful that the proprietor could hear me if I must need scream for help.

"You would not believe," he said, "that at this moment in my shop, I have Casanova, Madame Pompadour, Carrie Nation, and several other notables."

"Sidney is not Madame Pompadour," I cried anxiously. "You see I'm a bachelor and I couldn't possibly. . . ."

"I quite understand," interjected Fothergill. "No," he said, "Sidney is not Madame Pompadour. But I have already spoken far too freely. You have so unnerved me with your constant dogging of my steps, that I have revealed what I must perforce keep in total secrecy. I have jeopardized everything."

I shook my head hesitantly.

"What I don't comprehend," I said, "is how you came to know

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who each of these creatures really was."

He smiled at me wanly.

"Ah," he muttered, "that is because you have no idea of who *I really am.*"

So saying, he called for the check and after paying the bill, (which was outrageous considering the poor quality of the coffee and the two stale buns we had nibbled at), he departed without a single word of farewell.

I stumbled off dazedly, musing over the import of Fothergill's words and pondering the true identity of Sidney. To my utter shame, I found myself hoping he was the incarnation of some master stock manipulator and that he would be the making of my fortune.

Once again I sought out Emil Esterhazy but he was not in evidence, anywhere. I waited at the Czardas Cafe, his favorite hangout, toying with the Veal paprikash in rather desultory fashion. The waiter was completely crushed when I returned the Palicinta pancakes, uneaten. At

this juncture, Esther, Queen of the Magyar Gypsies, came to my table determined to read tea leaves. She stiffened at the sight of the tea bag resting in the butter plate, then imperiously ripped it open and scattered the damp mash over the inner lining of my cup.

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"Ah hah," she cried scowling fiercely into the cup.

I slipped a pound note into her oleaginous palm, hoping thereby to save my tiepin and cuff links.

"You are unhappy," she declaimed in a clear carrying timbre which rolled over the entire restaurant. I turned away abruptly, pretending to search for the waiter. It was to no avail. Esther thrust her face close to mine, hissing.

"Your problem begins with an S, no?"

I came alive at once.

"How on earth?" I cried.

She smiled and pirouetted off. I never saw the lady again. Nor for that matter, my solid gold watch, an heirloom dating back to Peterloo.

I arrived at my flat, desperately fatigued, frightened, uncertain, and somewhat flatulent. My attempts to sleep were without any success, and I whirled about in the uncertain frenzy that attends insomnia. The mystery of Sidney, his *real* identity, his life under the aegis of Fothergill, tore at me, leaving no room for more mundane thoughts.

At length I could bear it no longer. I dressed quickly and despite the lateness of the hour, headed directly for Fothergill's Pet Shop. The blinds were down but the soft glow of an evening lamp put a bright haze about the edges.

I RAPPED at the door, at first hesitantly, and then when no response was elicited, rather fiercely and rhythmically.

Fothergill appeared at last, clad rather indecorously in night gown and tasselled cap, sporting a candle in an antique brass holder.

"You've come for Sidney," he said, his voice subdued in the darkness surrounding the bright flame of his candle.

"I have," I said.

"So be it," said Fothergill. He closed the door quietly and padded off into the interior of the shop. When he returned, Sidney the Mynah bird was perched on his forearm.

"Mind his feed," said Fothergill, sighing deeply. He handed me a small volume on the care of Mynah birds which I stuffed into a side pocket.

"The price is 200 pounds," said Fothergill. It was double what I had offered him.

Despite the uncertain light, I fetched out my check book and wrote down the full amount payable to Fothergill. He studied the wet ink for a moment, blowing gently on the numerals to hasten drying.

I took Sidney off without further ceremony.

At my flat, Sidney made sev-

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eral rather disparaging comments about the decor which he considered a shade on the rococo side. I retired for the night, feeling a deep sense of completion flowing throughout my entire body. But Sidney's loud hacking cough kept me awake the entire night.

TUBERCULAR," said the vet the following day, clucking his tongue in sympathy. "First bird I've ever seen with T.B. I shall at any rate do a paper on this case for the Devonshire Veterinarian Journal."

I was wet with fear.

"The treatment?" I cried.

"None at all, I'm afraid," he said briskly. His eyes failed to meet mine, however, and they were suspiciously moist. Sidney seemed not at all perturbed by the revelation. He clucked rhythmically in a New England sea chantey with obscene lyrics.

There was of course no chance of keeping this bird with me. The possibility of contracting this chill disease, (particularly probable in the confined quarters of my flat), was horribly real. But illness or no, I was determined to penetrate to Sidney's secret name.

Donning a gauze mask, I proceeded to interrogate him relentlessly. He protested that he was in no condition to converse, but I was singlemindedly ruthless.

"Sidney is just a pseudonym," he clucked at length.

"Meaning what?" I said menacingly.

"Fothergill will hate me," he said, "but you're forcing it out of me. I'm Camille."

I recoiled in horror. So Fothergill, reprobate and cad that he was, had sent me an incarnate female, after all. Without further ado, I returned Sidney, thrusting his mottled feathers into the white patrician fingers of Fothergill. I strode off, bitterly cursing the duplicity of this man.

I walked about for hours but the violence of my feelings would not slack off. At length I determined to seek out Fothergill and vent my spleen full upon him. I returned to his shop and thrust open the door. The soft clucking of Sidney and the gentle laughter of Fothergill came to my ears.

"It was the coughing that got him," said Sidney.

"As well as the vet's diagnosis," chuckled Fothergill.

"I told him I was Camille. I was about to whip into "Che Gelida Manino" but I recalled it was the Tenor's aria," clucked Sidney.

I could hold back no longer. In a single bound, I had wrung Sidney's neck and been rewarded by the sweet cacophony of his death rattle.

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FOTHERGILL began to scurry off but the tasselled night cap proved his undoing. I caught hold of the gaudy tassel and plucked the cap from his head. He caught at his denuded skull in terror.

"You'll give me my death of cold," he cried. Then he burst into uncontrolled sobs. "You've done for Sidney," he wept.

"He played me for a fool. I could not tolerate that."

Fothergill drew his hand across his forehead in a distracted manner.

"You've no idea, absolutely no idea of what you've done."

"I've killed a foul little Mynah," I cried. "And I'd do for you if I had the stomach for it."

"I don't much care," said Fothergill. He turned his moistened luminous gaze upon me. "Do you know that Sidney, *my* Sidney, was the greatest fighting Mynah of our time? He was Daniel Mendoza reincarnated."

"Mendoza, the great British pugilist?" I said, awestruck.

"The same," said Fothergill. His twitching fingers began to braid and unbraid the tufts of his tasselled nightcap in an involuntary motion. "Just below my shop is a pit for fighting birds. Esterhazy books all wagers. And Sidney, lionhearted Sidney, was undefeated, of course."

"Of course," I said simply. "There was no other way for Sidney. But why did you sell him to me"

"There are many reasons, all bad," said Fothergill. "Perhaps because you pressed me to distraction. Perhaps because Sidney would have his bit of fun. It was a simple matter to bribe the vet into concocting that hideous story about Sidney's feigned cough."

To my everlasting shame, I must confess I felt a sense of relief at this last bit of news. I could now forgo the battery of Patch tests I had planned. I put my hand on Fothergill's shoulder but he shook it off as though it were leprous. I turned and walked out of his shop without another word.

* * *

SIDNEY was interred with a simple non-sectarian ceremony which I managed to attend in spite of Fothergill's objections. He sold his pet shop shortly thereafter, leaving behind all of his remaining animals.

Despite the desperate shortage of flats, I moved out, too, but not before I had given Esterhazy the sharper edge of my tongue in a heated discourse on brutes who trade on the stringy muscles of birds. He remained tranquil throughout the entire tirade and bade me a courteous farewell.

THE END

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and a tooth

By ROSEL GEORGE BROWN

Illustrator ADKINS

It is usually hard enough on a man when he has two women to contend with. But when both are in the same *mind and body . . .*

THEY went a little further than maybe they had to.

It was all a result of the accident.

I wasn't *in* the accident, you understand. Everyone thinks that was it, but it wasn't. All this was . . . well, damage from within. Emotionally shattering, I guess.

The only thing odd you'll notice about me is the drooping eyelid. The left eyelid. I notice it tends to bother people a little at first. They don't want to look straight at me. Maybe they think I mind. But I don't. It's a little thing and sometimes I think it even makes my dull, old face a little more interesting. You see, I'm really past the age when . . . but I'm not starting very logically.

I am not, perhaps, the most interesting person in the world. Age forty-five, I.Q. 110, five feet four inches tall weighing a hundred and fifty pounds. Widow with no children. (They were all killed in the accident and I'd stayed home to get the bills paid and write a letter or two. If I'd known they were going to get killed I'd have gone, too. It's odd, but I find myself regretting that most of all.)

* * * * *

She's a fool, you know. She's all tied up in the past and she thinks she's real virtuous devoting herself to the memory of my husband and children like that. So they're gone. Too bad. I'm not. There's a thing or two she didn't learn in those 45 years—old, fat thing! I don't like to eat and *I'm* slim. Only I can't get out of here.

* * * * *

OH, AND my name is Margaret Tilden—Meggie. You'll be wondering why I think a story

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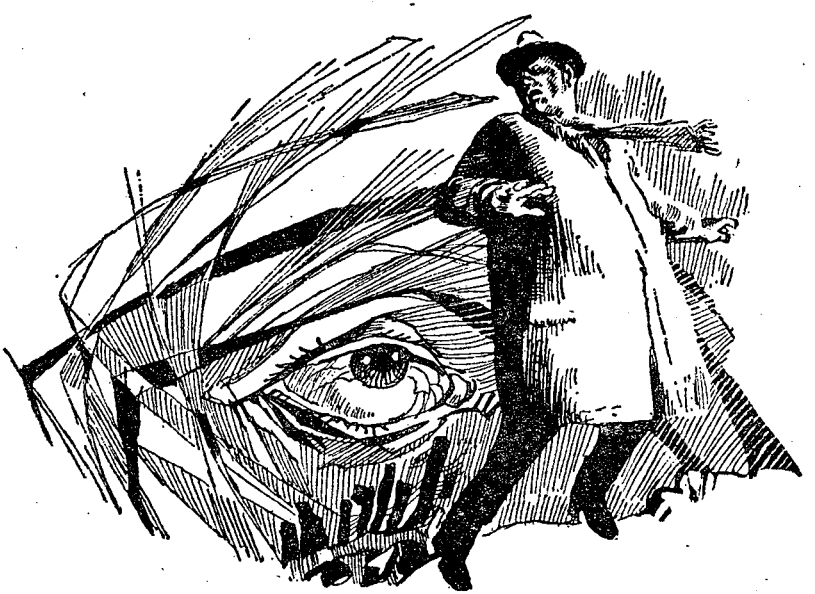
about me would be interesting. Well, for one thing, the psychiatrist told me I shouldn't just assume I'm dull. (But housewife, age forty-five, doesn't it sound dull?) I haven't been psychoanalyzed, you understand. If I had been, they don't say anything but Uh and Ah, I understand.

It was the experiment, that's what I thought you might find interesting. It was partly chance and circumstance that it happened to me, I guess.

It just happened that when I heard about the accident I went into a coma. I've never had any mental illness before, you understand, but this was a terrible shock. Anyway, I had to be brought to the hospital. And I just happened to drop into the lap of an experimental project they had going on.

I don't even remember the treatment, I was that far gone. What I *do* remember is coming to and feeling—not sad, not shocked, not grieving for my dead. Something much worse. I felt unreal. I had to look at my arms and legs and try to believe it was *me*. And remember the past and feel that it happened to *me*.



Maybe I can't make you understand what this kind of feeling is. As though I were an ap-

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pliance that had been turned off. And I kept searching around in my mind for the right thought, the right button to press to make me go on again. (Does this sound very silly?)

I knew that what waited for me was hopeless, helpless grief. And you might wonder why I should go seeking that when I could lie in a comfortable bed feeling nothing, nothing at all.

Let me point out that even "comfortable" bed meant nothing to me. Nothing, nothing, nothing. How can I describe the awful nothingness of nothing?

* * * * *

ACTUALLY, I'm glad they're dead. There. I said it and why not? I get sick of all the hypocricy in the world. The only difference between me and everybody else is that I don't mind admitting I'm no plaster saint. And I don't mind admitting that all my life I've felt as though I had a pillow stuffed over my face every time I tried to open my mouth.

It was Her, of course. *Her* mealy mouth could open any time it wanted to. And all that time *she* was happy—or she pretended to be happy. That's all very well, but what about *me?*

Me, me, me!

How does the genie feel when it gets out of the bottle?

Well, I'm not all the way out of the bottle yet. Genies are powerful, you know, but they've got to trick their way out of the bottle. A trick. That's what I need.

Where do I start?

* * * * *

But you see I couldn't find the right thought, the right button to press, and I *wouldn't* be able to because what I had developed was schizophrenia. You'll be thinking I had a split personality. No, that isn't really what schizophrenia means. Dr. Blumenthal (the psychiatrist) explained it to me but I couldn't possibly remember all that. I *do* know I had a serious mental illness and it even brought a change of life, which I guess I was due for anyway. So I had those physical symptoms plus my psychiatric symptoms.

So you can see where I jumped at a chance to have all my problems solved by an operation. And to do something useful for science at the same time—I felt so *useless*. My life was all for Henry and the children and now . . .

Of course they explained the operation wasn't fool-proof and the results couldn't be predicted with any degree of accuracy. I went into it knowing it wasn't quite safe.

And in fact, not quite . . . human.

* * * * *

SHE'S always trying to dramatize herself. I say, a fact's a fact and what does it mean, Hu-

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man? Like the French say about sex, if it can be done, its normal. It wasn't done fairly, of course. She got the right eye, which is the best one.

As soon as I heard about the operation I jumped at the chance. I didn't realize the most important part of it would be a side effect. But I saw a chance to become world famous—and it sounds like money to be world famous. Interviews on TV, articles in magazines—and hell, these scientists pull down a big salary. Why not charge them for the privilege of examining me? *They do things for money. I* do things for the glory of Science. Does that sound fair to you?

That Dr. Blumenthal, he has a greasy face and little rat eyes. He wants the money *and* the glory and he won't let me do a damn thing. He says he isn't ready to publish his results yet and that he doesn't want garish publicity.

His results! What does he think I am, a paramecium?

* * * * *

Actually (this isn't making it very interesting, but I want to tell the truth) the only effect of the operation I can swear to is that my left eyelid droops. For a while I had trouble seeing out of one eye, but to tell the truth my vision seems as good as it always was by now.

Dr. Blumenthal tells me I can control the muscles in my left eyelid, though I cannot have the vision of the eye. Well, I'm not really much concerned about it.

Of course my head was shaved and my hair is still quite short—about two inches long now, but I believe I'll keep it short. I think it looks rather nice this way. There's just a thin scar and I have thick hair.

I'm very glad I had it done. Somehow I feel much freer and *better*. And I'm sure I enjoy all the attention I get from the doctors and everybody.

Dear Dr. Blumenthal! Such a lovely, kind man and really quite good looking. It's amazing he's remained a bachelor all these years. I don't mean . . . what I mean is, I've heard women always fall in love with their psychiatrist. He's not my *psychiatrist* of course. I mean you'd hardly call this a psychoanalysis. But I think he understands that part, too.

* * * * *

I COULD have laughed. In fact, I *did* laugh, but then all the laughing I did had to be to myself. The operation, Dr. Blumenthal said, would serve not only the function it was supposed to serve, but it would also, merely by the fact of having the operation, serve to alleviate the strong guilt feelings and the death wish he said I harbored in some part of my mind.

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Guilt feelings? What good would it have done anybody if I'd gotten killed, too. And besides, Henry had it coming to him and who can blame me for wishing he was dead.

Over and over.

Once for each child.

If they thought *I* was neurotic they should have seen Henry—the prissy louse. If you can imagine anybody being prissy and lascivious at the same time. Prissy with me and lascivious with other women.

You see, what he did was periodically start a love affair. And it wouldn't work. I mean, he *couldn't*. So he'd come home and prove his manhood by getting *me* pregnant. You see? You see what I went through.

All three times, that was how it happened.

And those were the only three times. Those other women, they at least had the satisfaction of laughing at him. *She* wouldn't even let me do that.

And Dr. Blumenthal says I *subconsciously* wished they were all dead.

* * * * *

Dear Dr. Blumenthal has suggested a lobotomy. On the half of my brain I don't use, of course. He says he doesn't want to keep me in the hospital forever and I'll want to go out and live a normal life.

Does it sound odd to talk about living a normal life with half your brain gone? Well, it would have to me, too. But the brain isn't like an arm or a leg. When a part of the brain is gone, other parts can take over the lost functions and actually people don't come near using all of their brain when they have it (as most people do). And what they did with me was the culmination of a long series of operations starting with monkeys. They didn't just cut my brain in half. They separated out the part of my mind which was causing me trouble and instead of just cutting the connections to it, they connected it up with one of my eyes. (This was the part of the operation that was experimental, and that I had to volunteer for. In fact, I had to insist on it. I *wanted* it done, because I could see the scientific value of doing something like this with a human being instead of with just monkeys. I pointed out that it would even be unethical to kill off part of my mind without giving it a *chance* to see if it could function by itself. Why should I have any more right to exist than *it?* But my most telling point was that I was the perfect subject. I have no dependents, I had no previous history of mental disease and in spite of the fact that I was in the grip of an emotional disorder, I think I was perfectly capable intellectually of deciding of my own

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free will that I wanted to volunteer.

Does it sound like something unethical was done? No, no. There are a number of operations for mental disorder and this was done primarily as a curative measure. Very successful it was, too. Or will be, after the lobotomy. You see, I have these periods of blankness. . .

Yes, I will be glad to have the lobotomy and be out of this stuffy room, though I certainly wouldn't want Dr. Blumenthal to cut his experiment short just for that reason.

I mean, I *do* have his visits to look forward to and it means so much to have a strong man to lean on since I've lost Henry. And I can't help thinking I mean more to him than just another patient. Though of course it's purely Platonic. I'm sure. Even though he did do something unusual. It was when we were discussing what I'll do after my lobotomy. I was saying how hard it was to go back and try to take up my life again, and he reached out and held my hand!

* * * * *

I HAD what I thought was to be my last check up with the surgeon. Questions, questions, questions. I didn't answer one of them. I expect to get paid, I said, for every question I answer from now on. *That* shut him up, I can tell you.

Then I did something stupid. I threatened to expose the surgeon and Dr. Blumenthal and everybody else. I didn't mean it, of course. But they all act so damn *superior*. I told them I was going to say they tricked me into the operation. Of course I had signed a release. . . . They scare easy, these doctors.

They tossed me in a locked room for "observation."

I wasn't thinking fast enough. I haven't had time. I've gone and showed my hand. I didn't realize soon enough—this is all too new—but my best bet would have been to lie low. Just not to *exist* until I was out of reach of the damn doctors. That Dr. Blumenthal, he uses forceps on your mind.

But they can't any of them read inside of my mind.

And I'm getting an idea or two.

While I practice holding up my right eyelid. I've got to *learn* to do it, because She's got the involuntary control of it.

So today he came in while I was practicing. When I heard the door click I quick dropped my *left* eyelid—which meant I couldn't see too well, but all I had to do was sit there and talk. And act sweet.

That's not hard to do. I can always tell from his questions what he wants me to answer. You learn that from having a

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husband. All those years of being a housewife—that was experience, of a kind. Henry took advantage of her. She *knew* about those other women. But she wouldn't admit, even to herself, that she knew.

I don't mind admitting it. And I don't mind admitting that the male species owes me a lot of revenge. I hate them all. And Him. That Doctor Blumenthal.

Not her, though. I know how she'd think and act.

So that's how I acted, only I added a little of my own. I reached out and took his hand, for comfort. I know this surprised him, but it didn't displease him. I know these men! You see, I'm (we're) his creation and he's proud of us on his own behalf. But human emotions don't separate themselves out so easily, and after all I'm a woman and he's a man and some of it spills over.

He talked a lot to me about *her*, meaning me, really, only he didn't know it. He's so easily fooled! He's wondering if I'm disturbed by living in the same skull with her. And he thinks she's (I'm) unbalanced!

Normal, he says. She's normal and I'm not. As if he's the one who decides what's normal and what's not.

So he talks calmly of murdering me.

But of course it would be unbalanced of me to think of murdering *him*.

Now is that fair?

* * * * *

THE lobotomy is set for Friday and I must say, Dr. Blumenthal was as usual right. It is necessary that it be done, and be done soon. The periods of blankness are getting longer and longer and I always wake up to find myself so *tired*. What could I be doing when I'm not there to see?

And this depression I've been having. It's partly the onset of grief, now that I have my emotions back. At first I was so glad to feel *real* again that I was glad just to be able to cry. But now I guess the reaction is setting in and I'm beginning to think of the long, grey years ahead with no one for me to care for.

If I could only be of use to somebody!

* * * * *

It's the most exhilarating feeling! I even dance up and down the room when no one is here. Everything I do seems to succeed. O, that operation was a lucky thing.

It's the first time in my life I've ever felt really free, really happy, able to do exactly what I want to do.

And O, boy, do I have plans! Plans, plans, plans.

First, I found I could control that drooping eyelid. Then I found I could fool Dr. Blumen-

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thal into thinking I was *her*. Then—and this was the most important part of all—I found I could take control whenever I wanted to.

She has the strongest half, but she doesn't use her power so it doesn't do her any good. She forces herself to be self-effacing. Uses her strength to overcome herself, if you can imagine it. And *I'm* supposed to be the one with a psychosis!

I've asked Dr. Blumenthal to do me a favor. I want to go for a nice ride up through Blue Mountain and back one afternoon before the lobotomy. Since that's only two days, and they'll be doing things to me Thursday afternoon, I guess it'll be tomorrow.

* * * * *

IT WAS the eyelid.

I didn't like it, I tell you.

No, of course that didn't have anything to do with what I did. As a psychiatrist, I don't have likes and dislikes.

Now is not the time to explain all that. I'm upset, naturally. You'll just want to know what happened. That won't be easy to tell without going into the background of the patient.

No, of course I don't ordinarily go picnicking on Blue Mountain with one of my mental patients. The one I took was *not* a mental patient. She was perfectly normal. A charming woman with a very strong ego.

The eyelid? You're suggesting that I threw her against the rock because I was annoyed at her drooping eyelid? No, no. Legally, no, though subconsciously. . . . Legally, I was defending myself. It was self-defense.

I *did* call for help. But meanwhile I had to do something to keep from falling off the mountain. I'd like to see *you* guage your shove when you're about to fall off a hundred foot drop and you have half a second to make plans in.

And there's an insane eye staring at you. The wrong eye.

You don't understand the strength of the insane. The fact that she's smaller than me has little to do with the situation. In the first place she caught me completely unawares. I didn't even know we were near a drop. There were a group of rocks in the way of the view. And in the second place, her strength was operating at full capacity.

Please. As her physician I insist on riding in the ambulance. I really see no need for me to have to defend myself, but if you must question me, at least don't take me away from my patient.

No, I won't be doing the medical treatment. I imagine it's a concussion but there is no way to know how serious it is until we get to the hospital. I want to be with her when she regains consciousness.

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There would be no cause for alarm.

You see, as I pushed her back, to prevent myself being thrown over the edge of the cliff, her reactions when falling against the rock were involuntary. And since the desirable half of her personality is basically the stronger, that's the part which would have taken over and involuntarily protected itself by injuring the less desirable half of her mind. This may sound abstruse to you, but I assure you it's psychologically sound.

Indeed, this whole thing may turn out to be fortunate and certainly it will be interesting in the extreme to see . . .

No, of course I do not think of my patients as guinea pigs. I mean fortunate for the *patient*. You can't possibly understand.

YES, I know I have spoken of her as both sane and insane. Let me ask you to believe that it is an utterly unique situation. Not what you probably think of as a "split personality." You will notice, if she regains consciousness, that it will be the right eye that opens, because that is her dominant side. The other half of the brain is not Meggie. It is not sane. It is . . . it is to be put out of operation by surgery that has already been scheduled. That's why I say it may turn out to be for the best that . . .

You may question her, but I warn you that she will remember nothing of what has happened. If you insist, you can remain with me to see that I do not attempt to intimidate her—this is ridiculous—and when I (or if you prefer, the attending physician at the hospital) feel it is perfectly safe, you are welcome to question her alone.

I have not the least hesitation. She is perfectly sane, her answers will be perfectly honest.

There!

O, no, Meggie, you musn't . . .

Yes, I know she talks reasonably, but it isn't *her*. Look, she's got both eyes open. You certainly can't believe an insane person.

I *know* I said she was sane. But see, she's got both eyes open and she can't see out of the right one. It's her word against mine and surely you can't . . . it'll be easy to make tests on her vision.

But that has everything to do with it, which eye she can see out of. I've got my notes to prove it. I can review the whole case . . .

Meggie, you signed a release. There's no ethical question . . . no, you were never kept prisoner. I really . . . see, she's lapsed into unconsciousness again.

And look, that one staring, blind eye. It's dead. You see what's happened. Surely you see. She killed it. She killed my Meg-

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gie and now she's left alive. It wasn't the blow of being pushed against the rock. All that did was stun her so she could . . .

Can't you see it? That one dead eye?

I'm not doing anything to her. I'm just closing it. It's dead.

Get your hands off me! All right, I'll leave it alone. I don't know how you can stand to look at it.

What? No, Meggie. You're not going to get away with it. I know you can talk in a reasonable fashion. So can most schizophrenics.

But you're mad. You're stark, simply mad and I know it.

No, there can be no panel of psychiatrists. My results are unique and dependent on a comparison of the dead Meggie . . . now the tests would be invalid.

Of course as a psychiatrist I don't make moral judgements. But this is different.

* * * * *

NO, indeed you won't give me a sedative, *dear* Dr. Blumenthal. This is healthy, wholesome laughter and I've been collecting it for twenty years.

Don't you understand what happened? And you a psychiatrist! Who do you think felt guilty? Who had a death wish? Who was glad, instinctively, to be a martyr?

O, you fool.

You were going to prove your manhood by creating a new Margaret Tilden, weren't you? And you didn't know I was tired of being a testing ground? You're really no better than Henry.

O, you couldn't know, how good my laughter is.

Because this time *I* win. I'm out of the bottle and I'll tell you something else. I'm just beginning to see out of the right eye. Just a feeling of light, so far. See, I close my left eye and I still see light, like a sensitive spot.

* * * * *

SEE, she's unconscious again. You've got to believe me . . . maybe she'll die.

Yes, I see it moving. But it's wide open. Maybe the other half of her mind isn't completely . . . yes, *it's looking at me*, but I can't make out what expression.

Meggie! Hang on. I'm here.

Look, she's beginning to smile. Thank God! If only she can emerge, for a moment.

Meggie, can you try to tell these men . . . tell them what we were trying to do. Tell them.

Look, it's crying, that one eye. She *couldn't* think I deliberately pushed her against . . . Meggie, just relax then, and we'll talk later. It's all a misunderstanding . . .

It's gone. The expression. The smile. Meggie!

That eye, staring so! Can't you see? Can't you!

No. I don't suppose you can.

THE END

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a Devil of a Day

By ARTHUR PORGES

Sometimes we are inclined to think that Arthur Porges has already sold his soul to the devil—in exchange for an infinite number of plots about bargains with His Satanic Majesty. Here is still another story about a deal with the Devil—with a brand new Mephistophelian gimmick.

THERE are two classes of people who can recognize the devil on sight, no matter what his outward appearance. The first comprises the children of light, who have an instinctive revulsion against evil in any form. The other group is made up of those desperate, unhappy individuals who seek Satan's help, often without being aware of their quest.

Frank Palmer belonged in the second category. He was forty-five, handsome, and charming. All his life he had been trying to suck the world dry like an orange, but none of his frantic nibbles had ever got him past the rind, which was bitter to the taste. He was starving for some of the sweet pulp: travel, women, luxury foods, and the raw power of wealth.

From gambling to sponging to conning women, he had made a petty progress, and now found himself no nearer the goal. He had never suffered the disability of a conscience, and regretted only that none of his machinations had brought in enough money. Some women had lost only cash and jewels; but there were others who lost, through him, faith and hope; and a few lost even the will to live after Palmer had shown them a picture of their pitifulness as love-hungry misfits. He had a knack for hurting, and never tried to soothe any of his victims. As

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long as he was legally in the clear, their opinions of him meant *nothing*. The world was made up of people who took, and those meant to be taken. The latter were unworthy of concern or pity.

Sitting in the shabby bar-and-grill, eating a greasy hamburger, Frank Palmer felt that his own clock was running down. Before too long his greying hair, now so distinguished-looking, would thin out, his still youthful charm diminish. This was a turning point in his life; a moment to go for broke.

And just then his restless gaze settled on the man who sat alone in the most distant, shadowy booth, nursing a small drink. He was dark and burly, neatly dressed in a vaguely old fashioned way. None of the other patrons seemed to find him of interest, but Palmer felt a strong shock of recognition. The conservative suit didn't fool him. Surely this was the devil himself; the true master of the

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world, who could give a man anything he wanted. At a price, of course, but so what? The City of God might be different, but here on earth life is one great market place. Who knew that better than Frank Palmer? Yes, it was certainly Satan, sitting there sipping away, and hoping to do business as usual. It was no different than Tony Pardoe in another booth, waiting to peddle H; or Sam Black, near the door, selling his numbers.

He left the bar and walked over to the booth.

"MIND if I join you?" he asked, automatically, no matter how incongruous the gesture now, turning on his charm.

"Not at all," the other replied, staring at him with frank interest.

"I know you," Palmer said, a faint tremor in his buttery voice. One doesn't intrude on the devil lightly, even for business.

"I wouldn't be surprised," the dark man said. His own voice was a rumbling bass. "Your face is quite familiar to me."

"Then maybe you can guess why I'm here."

"I don't have to guess." There was an ironic gleam in the dark eyes, imperceptibly slanted.

"I want—things. You understand me? In fact, I want everything."

"Of course, you do; it's a human failing."

"Sure, but most people don't play it smart. They lose their souls for almost nothing. That's why I've come to the top man. I've wasted too much time on my own, like the other suckers. Now I know better. As soon as I saw you sitting here, it came to me: don't piddle—shoot the works. It's all the same in the end, but the scenery along the way is more worth while with this approach. That's how I figure it, so what about a bargain? You expect one, sitting here waiting—right?"

The devil—for it was undoubtedly he—smiled.

"Very true. Bargaining is my way of life. Just what do you want, exactly, and how much is offered me?"

"Oh, I know the score," Palmer said doggedly. "You have only one price, and I'm ready to pay it—when the proper time comes. As to what I want, here it is straight. The world—the whole damned world; for one week."

The bushy brows rose incredulously. For a moment it seemed that even Satan could be struck speechless by human audacity. Then he rumbled: "My dear man, I offered a price like that only once, and for the greatest, most luminous soul that ever paused on earth. Do you consider yourself in His class?"

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"It's only for a week," Palmer insisted. "That's a mere instant of time in terms of Eternity—or even the age of the world."

"Your presumption intrigues me," the devil said. "But such a deal is quite impossible."

Unabashed, Palmer retreated to his prepared position.

"All right. How about a smaller kingdom—say, a country?"

Satan thought about it for a moment.

"Still out of the question." Then, seeing that Palmer was about to make a heated protest, he raised one hairy-backed hand. "Impudence like yours is refreshing, and merits some consideration, by G—" Here he broke off with a cough. "I offer you a city," he continued immediately; "but not a modern one."

"Why not?" Palmer's tone was heavy with suspicion.

"Let's say there are reasons which compel even me."

"I don't understand. What kind of a city would it be, then?"

"One of the past."

"Which one is that?"

"Think of the greatest, richest, most famous of them all. Filled not only with wealth—gold, gems, paintings—but the loveliest women in the world: pampered beauties of a golden age."

"Let's hear the name," Palmer said, eyeing him warily.

"The Eternal City—Rome!"

THE man gaped at him; then a sly grin touched his lips.

"I get it now. You want to strike a blow for yourself at the same time. Turn the Holy City over to a—ah—client." He hesitated. "The whole thing will have to be a lot clearer than it is right now. That 'past' business, for example."

"I'll be happy to explain. You'll be sent back to the Rome of the Sixteenth Century—a magnificent age there. I'll give you the clothing of an English visitor—one of the 'Old Faith,' of course; that is, a good Roman Catholic, since Britain is not on good terms with the Pope. This way, you won't even need to understand Italian—just a bit of clerical Latin, which I'll supply. Then, for one week, you'll be master of Rome."

Palmer's eyes glistened, but he was still cautious. One needs a long spoon to sup with the devil.

"You mean I can take anything, or do what I like to anybody, without being punished then or later."

"Exactly."

"And then I'll be returned to this time, with all my loot intact."

"It will be in our agreement. Anything you acquire in that week is yours forever."

"And after my return," Palmer said, with a hint of a sneer.

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"Death? No chance to enjoy the take?"

"Not at all," the devil reassured him. "You will live to be seventy-nine years, five months, eight days, three hours, six minutes, and nine seconds old." He looked at the man. "Would you like to know the circumstances of your death?"

For a moment Palmer was visibly tempted; then he shook his head.

"Not for ten cities!"

Satan grinned. He had large canines, the man noticed. Then, for just a moment, the pleasant curtain of his eyes dropped briefly; something seemed to peer out; and Palmer's neck hairs prickled. Then the mask fell back into place, and Palmer drew a deep, shuddering breath.

"You have some wisdom, I see," the devil complimented him. "But is the deal to your taste? Let me summarize. I send you back to Sixteenth Century Rome. There, one week of absolute power will be yours to command the city and all its inhabitants up to the Pope himself. The treasures of the Vatican, the gold of the Lombard bankers, the fairest daughters of the nobility—all at your disposal for seven days. Then, back to this very seat here in the bar, with no time lost in transit. No reprisals, and a long life."

"What about health? I wouldn't want to be sick or crazy after my return. All the money in the world is useless in that case."

"Careful, aren't you? That's very sensible. I assure you that your future will involve no serious ailments of mind or body. Of course, when you die . . ."

"I know," Palmer said hastily. "But there are worse deals. You got plenty of people cheaper than that, I'm sure."

"True. You strike a hard bargain. Old Faust was an idiot by comparison." He was harking back, obviously, for he rubbed a faint, dark stain on his forehead. Almost sheepishly, he took his finger away. "That's where Luther hit me with an ink-bottle; what a temper the man had! The mark never did come off completely." Then, business-like again: "Well, is it a deal?"

"I don't see why not."

THE devil reached into the side pocket of his jacket, and pulled out a parchment. He handed it to Palmer, who read the flaming letters with great care. Only the dates needed to be filled in.

"It's almost too simple," the man said. "Doesn't look legal or binding."

"It's said that I invented lawyers," Satan told him; "which is quite true; but I get better service from their printed forms. Still, I'm not crazy enough to use

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them myself. Now, before you sign, let's see what dates are open." He began to study a small notebook.

Palmer watched wonderingly.

"You mean other people—?" he began.

"Certainly; but I can fit you in somewhere. Ah. What about October 4th 1582 to October 10th 1582—will that be all right?"

"I don't see why not."

"Good. Give me a little blood, and you can sign."

Palmer took out a pen knife, and was about to jab his thumb, when Satan interfered.

"Better let me sterilize that; you might get a nasty infection —and blame me!" He grabbed the knife, blew on the blade, and the steel glowed cherry red. "There; now it's safe."

Palmer stoically pricked himself, and after the devil had filled in the dates of his week, signed.

"Excellent," Satan said briskly. "If you're ready, I'll send you back this minute."

Palmer was thinking hard. Had he overlooked anything? His life and person were safe in that brawling age; his safe return and long life were guaranteed. It was all on the parchment. Nothing could go wrong if the devil kept his word, and he always honored the letter of his bond.

"Okay," Palmer breathed.

INSTANTLY Satan touched him with a long fingernail. The room swirled and dislimned about him, and he stood in a great square, feeling the weight of odd, unfamiliar clothes, smelling the hot reek of a nearly medieval city. Then it all seemed quite normal, except for the angry people around him. They were shouting and waving their arms in a manner typical of excited Latins. He couldn't understand a word of their dialect, but soon spotted the cause of their rage. Not ten feet from him, posted on a pillar, was a large rectangle of parchment inscribed with bold, black lettering. He stared at it, recognizing the language as Latin, but was swept aside by a group of furious women before he could decipher more than a few words. All around him people were chanting angrily, repeating some demand in unison over and over; while gaudily-clad men-at-arms tried vainly to disperse them.

Then, the colorful scene faded like smoke, and Palmer was back in the bar, facing the devil.

"What happened?" the man cried, apprehensive and indignant. "You took me back much too soon; I just got there!"

"That's true, in a way," the devil admitted. "But there was no reason to keep you there. My part of the bargain was fulfilled."

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"What in blazes do you mean?" Palmer's voice shook with fury. "You said a week; it's on the paper we signed. You can't back out of that."

Satan was smiling.

"It's not my fault if your week was snatched out of the calendar. Gregory XIIIth is to blame. That Papal Bull you started to read explained the whole thing. There was a cumulative error in the old Julian Calendar, and in order to correct it, the Pope decreed that October 4th would become October 15th. The people were unhappy; you heard them shouting together: "Give us back our eleven days!" But, of course, they never got them back; and I'm afraid you're in the same fix."

"It's a lousy trick—" Palmer blurted, and then broke off. Satan read his mind, and said: "Naturally—but within the letter of our bargain. After all, you accepted those dates. If the Pope wiped out that period, it isn't my doing. In England and many other places, the Julian Calendar was retained for a long time, but in Rome, the Calendar is precisely what Gregory declared it to be. Now if you had held out for London . . ."

"I wouldn't have got it," Palmer gritted. "And there was no waiting list; you picked those dates from the start—suckered me good." He peered about in a kind of despair. "So I end up with nothing, while you . . ."

"That's not true," the devil objected. "You still have a fair knowledge of dog Latin. I assure you, my—um—bad fellow, that's a high price for a soul like yours." The huge canines flashed briefly. "See you in 1998, after your seventy-ninth birthday." Then he was gone. **THE END**

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CONTINUITY

By ALBERT TEICHNER

A lifetime spent in the study of physics, of forces, of phenomena. Yet it took the hare-brained ideas of a young student to show Prof. Bartleby the way out. Or was it—in?

PROFESSOR BARTLEBY'S neatly-clipped mustache was pressing ever tighter into his thin lower lip and an upper left molar that had been removed thirty years ago was aching like the very devil. For a moment the blank faces of the students seemed to flatten before him like cartoon portraits on a backdrop—all except Nelson's which was jutting from the backdrop like a harsh fist, all pink cheeks and darting, over-intelligent eyes.

"This is not a philosophy course," Professor Bartleby said, nauseously looking down at the magnetized filings set on the white sheet of paper in two arching clumps. "I hope your question, Mr. Nelson, this time will have some vague connection with physics. Perhaps you'd even be willing to make it relevant to magnetism."

The backdrop stretched backward and forward into the third dimension and became a roomful of laughing students. Perhaps sarcastic victories came too easily after fifty years of intermittent teaching but this Nelson kid certainly deserved a few comeuppances. He only did a little better than average in laboratory reproductions of Galileo's inclined plane experiment or Boyle's work on enclosed gases, but that never stopped him from making learned inquiries about the correctness of assuming a frictionless medium or trying to improve on Gibbs and the Second Law of Thermodynamics. No doubt he was clever in mere theory-juggling, but not *that* clever.

Nelson waited uncomfortably for the laughter to die down, then plunged ahead. "No sir,

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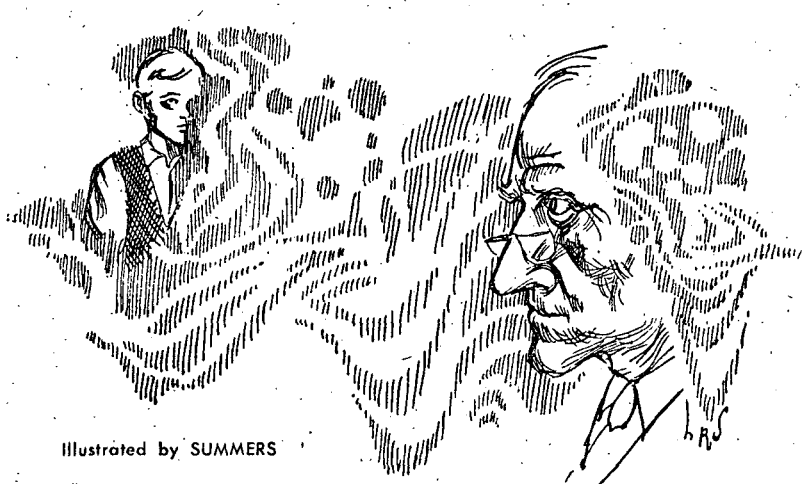
this is about magnetism. You say we mustn't confuse the magnetic lines of force with the lines of filings we see there."

"Do you find that difficult to follow? The field of force is continuous. The particles being acted upon by it are not." He pretended to be checking the sheet over the magnet as if uncertain himself. It brought the anticipated guffaws. "This still seems to be the case."

"Well, I understand that, Professor Bartleby, but what it leads to bothers me. The separate filings are real in a way that's independent of us but the force we're connecting them together with isn't real in the same way, is it? I mean we thought it up."

"At this point there's no need to go into—." The class had receded into the backdrop again and, feeling the now-familiar rising ball of tightness in his chest, he wanted to cut off the discussion before it started. But he could not get himself to do so. "Look here, Nelson, the magnetic force is as real as the thing it's acting on. Why shouldn't it be?"



Illustrated by SUMMERS

THE slate-blue eyes were no longer darting about but focussed earnestly on him. "But, sir, you said at one time the force was explained as a liquid that moved from one thing to another just as now it's explained by field theory. But the filings were always the same kind of thing. In other words, the separate elements haven't changed but our ideas about the continu-

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ous thing that connects them have."

"Why not, Nelson?" He pounded the desk and the filings jumped dirtily off the sheet. "A new theory is adopted when it describes more things than the old one and is more consistent."

"Sure, anybody can see that, sir, but it shows there's something funny about continuous things. I mean, we need them for explanations but we can't know them. Like, I mean, as if they were in a different universe."

The others, mostly engineering freshmen, could not follow what was going on and, most sensible of them, didn't seem to want to, either, but the direction of thought was making them uneasy. "We have a textbook to get through this term, Nelson. You'll find your 'problem' nowhere in its pages so I don't think we should take up your fellow students' restricted time."

Nelson, a faraway expression on his face, sat down and Bartleby got back to the comfortable routine of explaining what one gauss was and how it could be determined. But the fifteen-year-old—why did they admit so-called prodigies anyway?—had managed to ruin the hour for him. His stomach felt as though it was trying to digest a half-dozen peeled lemons and the throbbing ache which seemed to move between chest and head like an undampable vibration on a string, that was back again too. Of course, being seventy-one, he had experienced these discomforts before but he was sure they had become worse this past month since Nelson—something monstrous about that boy, the back of his head was too large—had come barging into *Physics I*.

Continuity versus discontinuity, he muttered inwardly, how did a kid like that get on to such problems? Worse, though, how did he always manage to get them into his head in the most impractical, unmanageable fashion possible? "This winding of wire around ships' hulls," he was saying, "was crucial in World War II degaussing procedures and took the most dangerous sting out of the magnetic mine menace. I worked on that project for a time and this I can tell you from personal experience," he found himself saying, "that continuity and discontinuity are inextricably intertwined like a vipers' tangle."

He caught himself up and fortunately the bell rang just at that moment. Fortunately, too, the boys did not seem to notice anything specially peculiar had happened; they were accustomed to hearing things they did not understand and just as-

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sumed the puzzles had some connection with something else they had missed.

Bartleby sat down and gloomily started filing papers into his brief case. The worst thing about this disastrous physics course was that he had asked for it instead of his usual advanced classes in applied physics. He had always preferred the practical problems of science and had spent many long leaves of absence on corporation and government projects. Now, approaching the end of his working life, he had wanted to take one last look at the simplest world of all, elementary physics. Instead he had found Nelson!

Who, he suddenly realized, was approaching his desk. "Sir," the boy said when still at least ten paces away, "Professor Bartleby—."

BARTLEBY started to get up, then sank back in his chair. As he did so, the inner pain eased. Did he actually want to thrash this thing out with Nelson? It felt that way. "Well?"

"Sir, about these particles and fields. I was wondering—suppose particles are more real to us than fields and suppose it's really the opposite somewhere else, a place that counts more than our selves?"

Poor kid! All tied up in the myths of metaphysics. "Sit down here, Nelson," he said, suddenly sympathetic. He leaned back in his swivel chair and stared at the Periodic Chart on the back wall as if contemplating the ultimate itself. "I want to give you some advice. You're a very bright boy, you can go far in physics, but don't bury yourself in the pure theory stuff, it can dead-end you. And, what's much more important, don't read hazy philosophical work that can't lead you to any conclusion."

"I've never read any philosophy books, Dr. Bartleby. I've always wondered, that's all."

"That makes it even worse. Look, I went through the same phase when I started in college—a little older than you but the same phase, not willing to think over anything smaller than the universe itself. Then I saw it was getting me nowhere. For instance, this epistemology stuff."

"What's epistemology?"

"Why, you brought it up yourself!"

"Did I?"

"Sure, talking about what's real outside our minds and inside them. Epistemology's the branch of philosophy that speculates on what the mind has to do with reality. Is it part of the world it's observing or separate from it or—or, they've thought up the cutest possibilities over the past few thousand years. All

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of which never closed one telephone relay or eased one wounded man's misery."

Nelson took it all in, wide-eyedly managing to look owlish without glasses. Finally he said, "That's just a side issue of the idea I keep wondering about. I'll try to avoid epistemology the way you say but my idea is about what you told us used to be called the ether, but really is not because it actually is a vacuum through which forces act. I wonder if—."

"Yes, got my doctorate back in 1918 and the war had not ended yet." There was that full-strength hydrochloride feeling again, as well as the head-heart taut string vibration. He could not take another outburst of the kid's endlessly unexpected fantasies and was going to head it off at any cost. "I went right into undersea cable research for the military, good sound, practical stuff, and when the emergency was over I did a little telephone work—."

"My idea is—."

He held his palm out vertically as if damming the threatening word flood. "I know, Nelson, you're going to say well what about basic research, isn't that 'impractical'? Well, frankly, sometimes it does get silly and it's never been my cup of tea. But I'm not denouncing it—real basic research can lead to practical applications, often does; your ideas can never lead to anything except self-contained circles. Continuity and discontinuity, yes, as we have them organized in today's quantum description but not," he chuckled, "as in Nelson theory."

That terrible chest pain had turned into a node between his forehead and the base of his spine. He had to stop—and listen.

"My idea is that in a universe of true continuity that may be all around us our separate particles of matter would be the nothingness and the connecting forces we imagine almost vacuums of nothingness too because anything we think up can't be truly, completely continuous."

"I can't imagine how we could test this hypothesis," Bartleby drily observed, getting to his feet and swinging the briefcase off the desk all in one abrupt motion. "So there's no practical point to the idea, no more than if I suggested that three teakettles are at this moment rotating about an asteroid somewhere in Andromeda. I couldn't prove it but you couldn't disprove it."

That seemed to quiet the boy down. Bartleby stared at the iron filings scattered about the demonstration desk. He never liked to leave disorder behind

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him. Oh, never mind, the janitor would clean it up this time or he'd get to it himself in the morning.

"There is *one* way to test my idea," said Nelson suddenly. "But it couldn't be any help to *us*. You're right, Professor Bartleby, it's all impractical. I'm going to stop thinking about things like that." They reached the classroom door and he held it open for the older man. "Can't get me anywhere."

"I'm very pleased to hear it," his teacher nodded, feeling better again.

They went down the corridor toward the front door. "It must be my age," Nelson said, looking amusingly preoccupied with the importance of his ideas as only the young can. "I'm so much younger than the other guys. But I'll adjust soon."

"Only a phase." Bartleby gave his last chuckle. "We all go through the phases, one after the other." They came out onto the steps. "Well, Nelson, this is where we part."

"Yes sir." He stared at the textbook he was carrying. "Have a lot of studying to do tonight."

BARTLEBY watched the boy move lithely across the street on his soiled white bucks, then he turned to plod into the campus toward home. He gave one quick glance to the leaves, just now bursting from their buds into separate green glory, and left it at that. There was still a slight chill in the air these days as dusk came on. Martha would have the fire blazing before his easy chair and he could do with some creature comforts. What was the use of denying it?—the pain had not gone away.

He shifted the brief case into his other hand. And there was no denying either that kid had an uneasy way of touching raw nerves in the mind. Continuity, discontinuity—it *was* a highly unsatisfactory state of affairs. He wouldn't have been bothered if he still felt interested in research but his mind seemed to be emptying of details these days.

All the things we know really are separated from each other, he said to himself. *So we supply forces that connect them. But that really doesn't supply more than a temporary answer because then you wonder what connects the connecting forces to the things and to each other. Always another gap of separation to leap. . . .*

He was facing the neat white colonial house and pushed the picket gate open, then carefully closed it behind him. He started to put the key in the door but, as usual, Martha opened it for him before he could do so himself. Except for the white hair

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and the fine wrinkles on her neck and forehead it could have all been happening thirty years ago when that aching tooth was still really in his head.

"Anything interesting today?" she said, smiling as he kissed her cheek.

"Nothing worth discussing," he said.

She gave him an anxious glance. "You sound a little out of breath, John."

"Feeling all right," he said grumpily, moving into the living room. He lowered himself into his chair and looked into the ever-changing fire.

"Jenny says dinner will be ready in ten minutes."

"Good," he said, managing a smile as she went out of the room. "Very good, Martha."

It really wasn't, though. Certainly Jenny had always been an excellent cook but right now he didn't care whether he ever had another meal. He felt tired and fuzzy-brained and, to top it off, there was this urge to be metaphysical that had come on him out of nowhere. Only nothingness was absolutely continuous. Nothing, everything—the same things. All words were inadequate for it.

That kid with his crazy notions! What did he expect? Of course things were separate, discontinuous, that's what made them things. But you didn't question what actually existed. You lived by accepting it and going on from there.

"Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

He looked up to see Martha there again. "Of course, I'm all right. Why shouldn't I be?"

"You looked so funny just now, Harry."

"I tell you I'm all right, Martha. Never felt better in my— must tell that Nelson kid."

His eyes focussed on her, then on a receding point beyond where she was standing.

"Harry, what are you doing?" she said nervously.

"Testing," he mumbled. "I'm testing."

HIS mind had gone right through her and she had not noticed! Moving down a shrinking spiral into finer and finer structures. Molecules tumbling along each other in slower and slower motion and then atoms hardly moving at all and mesons almost frozen and then nothingness, perfectly still.

He had a feeling that space and time themselves were now bending, curving into each other—but how could they when there was nothing to curve or bend?—yes, *bending into each other!* All resistance to his movement was gone and he was everywhere at once in this frictionless, infinitely expanding

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medium, moving through what he was a part of and passing through other minds in movement too as if all minds could be at the same point at the same time.

Specks of nothingness slowly drifted through the medium, incredibly tiny and only noticeable because the absence of the medium anywhere was such an extraordinary thing that it had to be noticed. Nothing was understandable but there was no one to question.

'There are no questions here,' other minds said instantaneously in his own, 'only answers. You cannot be continuous without the contrast of separate and distinct things to make you aware you are continuous and we-you make these separate things out of the little drifting bubbles of nothingness.'

The bubbles began to whirl faster and faster around each other and he rose past atoms of nothingness to molecules of it, then to vaster, grosser structures that moved less rapidly through the continuous oneness. Finally he was back among familiar things at last but as if for the first time seeing their positive image where before all had been negative.

The appearance of iron filings was on the appearance of a desk but he knew the shapes existed only as broader outlines of nothingness against the infinitely vaster sea of continuous unity. And the same was true for the shape of what was supposed to be Nelson absorbed in a supposed book in which the real universe was turned inside out like a Moebius in four dimensions. And then there was the negative shadow of Martha with tears rolling down her cheeks!

When was he going to awake, becoming practical, from this? When would he stop being entangled in this structure of illusions?

Vaster structures of nothingness started appearing and they made the appearance of a college campus drifting through unity and the shape of a town immersed in a sea of reality but apart from it.

When the awakening? *When?*

Then he saw gross chunks of the empty, circling bubbles and the chunks formed a long box shape of nothingness. Inside lay a long form of the same, structured emptiness and the structure was starting to change. His own negative image crumbling within the wider image of earth!

And suddenly he knew that he at last was about to be born.

Now.

THE END

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HORSEMAN!

By ROGER ZELAZNY

Illustrator SUMMERS

A strange rider swept through the village, at his side a sword that ate flesh and drank blood. And in his wake the portent of his words echoed for all to hear.

WHEN he was thunder in the hills the villagers lay dreaming harvest behind shutters. When he was an avalanche of steel the cattle began to low, mournfully, deeply, and children cried out in their sleep.

He was an earthquake of hooves, his armor a dark tabletop of silver coins stolen from the stars, when the villagers awakened with fragments of strange dreams in their heads. They rushed to the windows and flung their shutters wide.

And he entered the narrow streets, and no man saw the eyes behind his vizor.

When he stopped so did time. There was no movement anywhere.

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—Neither was there sleep, nor yet full wakefulness from the last strange dreams of stars, of blood . . .

Doors creaked on leather hinges. Oil lamps shivered, pulsated, then settled to a steady glowing.

The mayor wore his nightshirt and a baggy, tossled cap. He held the lamp dangerously near his snowy whiskers, rotating a knuckle in his right eye.

The stranger did not dismount. He faced the doorway, holding a foreign instrument in one hand.

"Who are you, that comes at this hour?"

"I come at any hour—I want directions, I seek my companions."

The mayor eyed the beast he rode, whiter than his beard, whiter than snow, than a feather . . .

"What manner of animal is that?"

"He is a horse, he is the wind, he is the steady pounding of surf that wears away rocks. Where are my companions?"

"What is that tool you carry?"

"It is a sword. It eats flesh and drinks blood. It frees souls and cleaves bodies. Where are my companions?"

"That metal suit you wear, that mask . . . ?"

"Armor and concealment, steel and anonymity — protection! Where are my companions?"

"Who are they that you seek, and where are you from?"

"I have ridden an inconceivable distance, past nebulae that are waterspouts in rivers of stars. I seek the others, like myself, who come this way. We have an appointment."

"I have never seen another like yourself, but there are many villages in the world. Another lies over those hills," he gestured in the direction of a distant range, "but it is two days travel."

"Thank you, man. I will be there shortly."

THE horse reared and made a sound terrible to hear. A wave of heat, greater than the lamp's, enveloped the mayor, and a burst of wind raced by, bowing the golden blades of grass which had not already been trampled.

In the distance, thunder pealed on the slopes of the hills.

The horseman was gone, but his last words hung upon the wind:

"Look to the skies tonight!"

The next village was already lighted, like a cluster of awakened fireflies, when the hooves and steel grew silent before the door of its largest dwelling.

Heads appeared behind windows, and curious eyes appraised the giant astride his white beast.

This mayor, thin as the gatepost he leaned upon, blew his nose and held his lantern high.

"Who are you?"

"I have already wasted too

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much time with questions! Have others such as myself passed this way?"

"Yes. They said they would wait atop the highest hill, overlooking that plain." He pointed down a gentle slope which ran through miles of field, stopping abruptly at the base of a black massif. It rose like a handless arm, turned to stone, gesturing anywhere.

"There were two," he said. "One bore strange tools, as you do. The other," he shuddered, "said, 'Look to the skies, and sharpen your scythes. There will be signs, wonders, a call—and tonight the sky will fall.' "

THE horseman had already become an after-image, haloed in the sparks thrown from struck cobblestones.

He drew rein atop the highest hill overlooking the plain, and turned to the rider of the black horse.

"Where is he?" he asked.

"He has not yet arrived."

He regarded the skies and a star fell.

"He will be late."

"Never."

The falling star did not burn out. It grew to the size of a dinner plate, a house, and hung in the air, exhaling souls of suns. It dropped toward the plain.

A lightning-run of green crossed the moonless heavens, and the rider of the pale green horse, whose hooves make no sound, drew up beside them.

"You are on time."

"Always," he laughed, and it was the sound of a scythe mowing through wheat.

The ship from Earth settled upon the plain, and the wondering villagers watched.

Who or what did it bear? Why should they sharpen their scythes?

The four horsemen waited upon the hilltop. **THE END**

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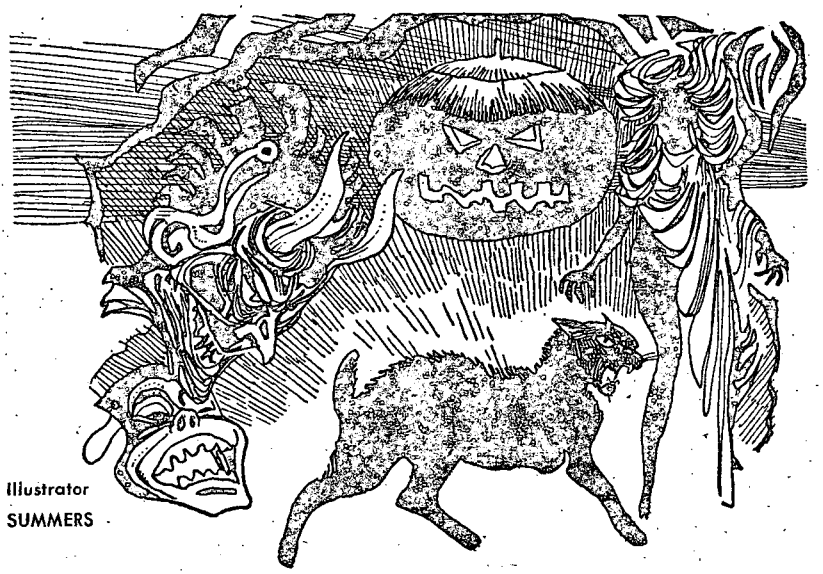
There were several women in his life . . . and one of them was a witch who had selected him to be the . . .

Victim of the Year

By ROBERT F. YOUNG



Illustrator SUMMERS

HAROLD KNOWLES had been seeing the small brunette every Monday morning for the past six months, but their trysts were of an official rather than a romantic nature, and up until the Monday morning when he signed for his final unemployment-insurance check he had considered her no more noteworthy than the other are-you-ready-willing-and-able - to - work - sign-here-please girls who shared her duties with her behind the claimants' counter. True, he had wondered once or twice why she would never meet his gaze and on several occasions he had been mildly, if

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perversely, tempted to reach across the counter and tweak the wispy bangs that curled along her forehead; but up until the moment when she slipped the note into his claimant's folder, that was about as far as either his curiosity or his interest had taken him.

Immediately after performing the aforementioned act, she handed him the folder and leaned over the counter. For the first time her eyes met his, and he was astonished at their blue naïveté. "Read this as soon as you get home," she whispered. "It's important!"

Several buildings from the one that housed the employment office he stepped into a deserted store-entrance and withdrew the folder from his pocket. Pulling out the note, he unfolded it. For some time he stared uncomprehendingly at the two frost-kissed maple leaves it enclosed, then he transferred his attention to the message itself. It was written in a large, almost child-like, scrawl, but the character of its penmanship was by far its least remarkable quality.

Dear Harold (he read): *Tonight is Halloween and soon you will be in grave danger. I am a witch and I know about such things. As proof of my powers I am enclosing two magic leaves which will when you need them turn into $20 bills. As additional proof, I will make a prophecy. Your interview at Ackman Innovators, Inc. this afternoon will turn out the same way all your other interviews have turned out ever since you lost your job eight months ago: you will not get to first base. Meet me at five o'clock when I get through work and I will explain everything.*

GLORIA MAPLES

HE read the message again, momentarily expecting the words to realign themselves into sentences that made sense. They did nothing of the sort. Girls had written him silly notes before, but this one topped them all.

He shook his head in an attempt to clear his thoughts. Granted, tonight was Halloween, and granted, Halloween was supposedly the time of year when witches crept out of their cobwebbed closets and did barrel-rolls on brooms, and granted, his run of bad luck had reached a point where he half-believed that it was attributable to other than natural causes. But still and all!—

Gradually the world reassumed its sane and sensible aspect. The are-you-ready-willing-and-able-to-work-sign-here-please girl was putting on a

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witch-act in a naive attempt to attract his attention—that was all. Certainly, working as she did, less than an arm's length away from the job-placement section, she could have found out about his forthcoming interview with Mr. Ackman easily enough. And as for her magic leaves—

He laughed and started to throw them away. But for some reason he changed his mind and slipped them into his pocket instead. He wadded up the note and tossed it into a nearby refuse-can; then, putting the incident from his mind, he returned to his rooming-house to get ready for his luncheon-date with his girl friend, Priscilla Sturgis.

Old Mother Hubbard was in her kitchen, rattling pots and pans, when he tiptoed into the downstairs hall—he had taken to tiptoeing lately because of the twenty-dollars back-rent he owed her—and as she never closed her door except at night or when she went out, he glimpsed her as he passed it. She was standing tall and almost scarecrow-thin in front of the kitchen stove, still stubbornly wearing black in deference to the husband who had been dead now for nearly ten years. Her real name was Mrs. Pasquale, and she kept a cat instead of a dog; but one of her first roomers, inspired no doubt by the hunger that sometimes shone in her dark and liquid eyes, had started the sobriquet rolling, and she had been known as "Old Mother Hubbard" ever since.

His room still smelled of the canned chicken-soup he had heated for breakfast that morning, and he opened the window to air the place out. After shaving in the second-floor bathroom he combed his hair in his dresser-mirror, then returned to the street. There, he lit the first of the three cigarettes he allowed himself each day and blew smoke into the October wind. On the stoop next door a little boy was industriously carving a grotesque mouth in a big pumpkin.

THE site for the luncheon date was a swank restaurant across the street from the department store where Priscilla held down the job of buyer. She was already there when Harold arrived, and he joined her at her table, afflicted with that curious combination of admiration, adoration and awe which the sight of her invariably evoked in him. She was sunlight and laughter made woman. Her eyes were as golden as October days and her hair was the hue of Indian maize; her smile was Indian summer. Small wonder that, in a vain attempt to augment his savings and thereby expedite their wedding date, he had exchanged his suburban apartment in Forestview for a cheap room in the city; small

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wonder that his bitterness over the misfortunes that had dogged his footsteps ever since should be all the more acute.

But you'd never have known from the warmth of her smile that in the space of eight months he had been reduced from a prosperous suburbanite to a near-penniless city-dweller with nothing between him and starvation but a five-dollar bill and a final unemployment-insurance check. "Hi, doll," she said. "Coming to my party tonight?"

"I—I don't know," he said, thinking of the outdated cut of his best suit and wondering, as he had the first time she'd asked him, why she hadn't made it a masquerade party in honor of the occasion.

"Oh, but you've just got to come, Harold! We're going to bob for apples and pin the tail on the donkey and dance and everything. Not only that, Uncle Vic is going to be there, and he's just dying to meet you!"

She was originally from out of town, and Uncle Vic, so far as Harold had ever been able to ascertain, was her only living relative. "All right," he agreed reluctantly. "What time does it begin?"

"Seven-thirty—and don't you dare show up a second later. Wait'll you see the Halloween cake I baked—it's out of this world!"

She only had an hour for lunch, and it flew by. Over their second coffees she told him about the palatial new elementary school with the two swimming pools which the Forestview citizens had voted to build and about how the school tax would double itself within five years as a consequence. He was not surprised: as a one-time denizen of the community he knew full-well how the citizens doted on their offspring. Almost before he knew it, it was time to pay the check, and after signaling the waitress he reached into his pocket and pulled out what he thought was the lonely five-dollar bill. It was so crisp and new that it crackled between his fingers, and that was odd because when he had put it into his pocket it had been old and crinkled. Looking at it, he discovered that it had changed in other ways too: it had Andrew Jackson's picture on it instead of Abraham Lincoln's, and in each of its corners the numeral "20" stood out bold and clear.

An icy wind blew down the back of his neck and set his nerve-ends to tingling. Hurriedly he pulled out the pocket's remaining contents. They consisted of two articles: another crisp twenty, and the missing five.

He became aware that he was the focal point of two pairs of eyes. One pair—Priscilla's—were a lambent gold. The other pair—

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the waitress's—were an impatient hazel. Hastily he paid the check with one of the twenties, and after receiving his change, escorted Priscilla across the street to the department store. She looked at him curiously when they reached the entrance and he thought for a moment that she was going to question him about his sudden wealth. But she didn't. All she said was, "See you tonight, doll—'by."

HIS interview was scheduled for three o'clock. He killed the lion's share of the intervening two hours on a bench in the park, examining the pros and cons of the reality of witches. He arrived at the following conclusions: (1) in common with alchemy, witchcraft was a product of the dark ages and held up not one whit better in the uncompromising light of modern science; (2) there was a logical explanation behind the seemingly miraculous metamorphosis of the maple leaves (he didn't know what it was but he was darned if he was going to lose faith in the scientific light because of a dark corner or two); and (3) the are-you-ready-willing-and-able-to-work-sign-here-please girl knew about as much about sorcery as she probably knew about sex.

Feeling better, he left the park and took a bus to Ackman Innovators, Inc. The girl behind the receptionist's desk looked at him with hostile brown eyes when he handed her the card which he had received in the morning's mail from the job-placement division. She glanced at it, then promptly handed it back. "Mr. Ackman isn't in right now," she said coldly. "However, if he'd had an appointment to interview you I'm sure he would have told me."

Harold was dumbfounded. "But—"

"And anyway," the girl continued, "we're not doing any hiring at the moment. Come back in about two months."

Two months! "But this card says—"

"Two months," the girl repeated firmly. "Good day, sir."

It was a grim young man who stepped into the street a moment later and headed for the bus stop, and it was a grim young man who got off the bus some ten minutes later and made a beeline for the employment-office. The girl on duty behind the job-placement counter proved to be as much in the dark as he was. "Why don't you go back tomorrow?" she suggested. "In the meantime I'll—"

"Not in a million years!" he said. Turning to leave, he saw the are-you-ready-willing-and-able-to-work-sign-here-please girl who had slipped the note into his folder regarding him earnestly

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from behind the claimants' counter, and for the second time that day an icy wind blew down the back of his neck. He remembered her name: Gloria Maples. *Gloria Maples,* he said to himself grimly, descending the stairs to the street. *Avocation—Witch.*

His new wealth rendered further adherence to his poverty-induced cigarette schedule unnecessary, so he bought a pack of filter-tips in a nearby drugstore; then he returned to the employment-office building and waited by the doorway till five o'clock came. He was halfway through his fourth cigarette when she finally stepped into the street.

Her blue eyes brightened when she saw him. "Hi," she said. "We'll go to my apartment—I can talk better there."

SHE lived in a third-floor walk-up in a rooming house almost as run-down as Old Mother Hubbard's. He followed her through a small kitchen into a slightly larger living room. It contained a battered mohair sofa, a battered mohair chair and a wobbly glass-topped coffee table. There was a three-legged black cat, with part of its tail missing, sleeping on the sofa.

Gloria sat down beside it, picked it up and placed it gently on her lap. "Matilda, this is Harold," she said. "Harold, this is my cat, Matilda."

Harold took the mohair chair. "What happened to her other leg?"

"She got run over by a hit-and-run driver and I found her lying in the street and took her to a vet. He—he wanted to put her away but I wouldn't let him. Nobody ever claimed her so I kept her. A—a witch is supposed to have a black cat."

He looked at her contemplatively. Half an hour ago he had firmly believed her to be a witch; now the mere idea of such a thing seemed utterly preposterous. Why, she was as naive as a May morning! Naive or not, however, she still had some explaining to do. He fixed her with uncompromising eyes. "Please to begin," he said.

"I—I will." She stroked Matilda's back with nervous fingertips. "I'll—I'll begin at the beginning. First of all, I'm not a full-fledged witch yet—I'm an apprentice witch. You see, the coven-sisters in the various districts are always on the lookout for potential witches, and whenever they hear of someone who's discontented and bitter they contact her through their underlings and offer to send her through witch-school. It's only a one-year course, but they're awfully strict, and if you're caught doing something a respectable witch wouldn't do, you're disqualified. For—for instance, if the coven-

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sister who nominated you our class guinea-pig ever finds out I'm trying to help you she'll have me expelled immediately—and—and not only that, she may try to do me in too."

Harold lit a cigarette. He took a deep drag. "What?" he asked a little desperately, "is a class guinea-pig?"

"I—I was coming to that," Gloria said. "You see, each Candlemas the senior coven-sister of the three local convens nominates a Victim of the Year and turns him over to the apprentice-witch class till Allhallows Eve for them to practice their sorcery on. Then, on Allhallows Eve, she takes over and tries to do him in in some diabolical way. This—this year you were nominated.

MY—my classmates and I vied with each other in doing mean things to you. First we fixed it so you'd get laid off, and then we caused your ex-employer to tell the employment-office that you quit so you'd have to wait six weeks for your first unemployment-insurance check and wouldn't have enough money to keep up your payments on your car and would lose it, and ever since then we've been conjuring up antagonism toward you in the minds of the other local employers and their office personnel, and—and all the while I kept seeing you come in every week to sign for your checks and saw how frayed your sleeves were getting and—and how sad you were and—and—Do—do you remember that quart of milk you brought home one time and it turned out to be sour when—when you got around to drink it? Well, I'm the one that soured it, and oh, Harold, I'm so ashamed of myself I could just lie right down and die!" And before his startled eyes she burst into tears and ran out into the kitchen.

Matilda had alighted on all three feet, and now she came over and began rubbing her furry sides against his pant-leg. He patted her head abstractedly, shaken in spite of himself. He *had* been laid off; his ex-employer *had* told the employment-office he had quit; he *had* lost his car; —everything that Gloria had said, in short, was true.

Granted; but that didn't mean she was *responsible* for his job-difficulties—it merely meant that she knew about them. And as an are-you-ready-willing-and-able-to-work-sign-here-please girl, how could she help knowing about them? As for the sour-milk incident, she could have gotten the information from Old Mother Hubbard; after all, it was the old lady's refrigerator that the milk had gone sour in.

Presently he heard her moving about in the kitchen, and in a little while she appeared in the

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doorway. "Come—come out and sit down, Harold," she said. "I—I fixed us some sandwiches."

THE sandwiches were peanut-butter. He ate three and washed them down with two glasses of milk. She ate half a one and drank half a glass of milk. Some of the milk clung to her upper lip in a moist white film. "You've no idea how much better I feel, now that I've got my wickedness off my chest," she said. "You will be careful tonight, won't you? The best thing to do is stay where there's lots of people. It's hard for a witch to hex you when you're in a crowd."

He looked at her milk-mustache, growing more amused by the second. "I'm going to my girl friend's Halloween party, so I should be safe enough," he said.

She dropped her eyes. "I—I guess you'll be safe enough there all right. It would be better, though, if you stayed somewhere where there are plenty of policemen. Witches are leery of the law. Devil's deputies, too. His—his majesty insists on outward conformity and good citizenship, and if any of his employees get caught doing something even a little bit illegal, he gives them the ax, and bingo!—their power is gone."

"You mean 'the pitchfork', not the ax, don't you?" Harold said, holding back his laughter.

"This is no time to be facetious, Harold. Don't you realize that your very life is at stake?"

She got up and returned the bottle of milk to the refrigerator. Then she picked up the jar of peanut butter and carried it over to a tall cupboard by the sink. He gasped when she opened the door. Everyone of the shelves was filled with similar jars, and in some cases they were piled two high.

"Good lord!" he said. "Is that all you ever eat?"

She faced him shyly. "Not—not exactly. I eat lunch in the cafeteria across the street from the office. I—I was never very good at cooking. Back home, mom did it all, and when I got transferred here there was no one to teach me."

He stood up. How she had prophesied the outcome of his interview he would probably never know, but one thing he did know: she wasn't any more to blame for the way it had turned out than she was to blame for the way all the others had turned out. After she got over her complex he would return the two twenties to her, and perhaps then she would explain how she had tricked him into believing when he had first looked at them that they were maple leaves. It would be futile to ask her now.

"Well, thank you for the sandwiches," he said.

She accompanied him to the

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door. Something about her forlorn aspect prompted him to give her Priscilla's telephone number. "In case you need me for anything," he explained. "And now I've got to go."

"Good—good by, Harold. And be very careful, please."

THERE were witches galore in the streets, not to mention goblins, ghosts, brownies and spacemen; however, he was in no mood for trick-or-treaters, and he hailed the first cab that came along. For some reason he couldn't get Gloria out of his mind. He was so pre-occupied with her, in fact, that when he entered the rooming-house he didn't remember to tiptoe till he came opposite Old Mother Hubbard's door and saw the old lady standing before the stove, stirring the steaming contents of a large black kettle with a long wooden spoon. It was too late then, for she had already heard him. Setting the spoon aside, she came swiftly through the doorway, hunger shining in her eyes, her black cat tagging at her heels.

He remembered the second twenty just in time and thrust it into her hand when she came up to him; then he brushed past her and hurried up the stairs. In his room he donned his best suit and surveyed himself in the dresser-mirror. He could get by all right, he decided—provided that he stayed in the background. The background was where he belonged anyway.

Forestview was a half hour's ride by bus, so the sooner he got started, the better. He descended the stairs, tying his tie on the way down. Old Mother Hubbard was nowhere to be seen, but the contents of her kettle were bubbling audibly and giving off a gamy odor that permeated the entire downstairs hall. He was glad when he reached the street. The sky was overcast and the air had grown appreciably cooler. Turning up his suitcoat collar, he headed for the bus stop. Thirty-five minutes later he arrived in Forestview.

Priscilla's house was a modern American-colonial and stood at the end of a maple-bordered street. Cars jammed its driveway and were parked along the curb halfway to the corner. Many of them had out-of-state license plates; in her capacity as buyer, Priscilla traveled a lot and met many out-of-town people. She answered his ring, resplendent in a sequined sheath. "Hi, doll, come on in," she said warmly. "Everybody's just dying to meet you!"

There were almost forty people present, and Priscilla must have praised him to the skies, judging from the enthusiastic way they responded when she introduced him. Especially Uncle Vic, who turned out to be a tall

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wiry individual in his sixties, with crew-cut white hair, keen blue eyes and a firm handclasp. "Come on out to the bar," he told Harold, "and I'll mix you a drink."

The "bar" was the breakfast counter. Uncle Vic made him a stiff highball. "Priscilla's quite a girl, don't you think?" he asked, handing it to him. "Wait'll you see some of the innovations she's dreamed up for a little later on in the evening!"

"Are you from around here, sir?" Harold asked, still somewhat dazed from Priscilla's resplendence.

"Oh yes. I'm district manager for Schierke and Elend Enterprises. Quite a famous international concern—though probably you've never heard of it. Let's join the others, shall we?"

PRISCILLA'S stereo was going full-blast and the living-room rug had been rolled up and stashed away in a corner. Priscilla was dancing with a tall young man as darkly handsome as she was radiantly beautiful. Harold, his diffidence routed by the highball he had drunk, cut in. She was feather-light in his arms, and her eyes were golden mirrors in which he saw the world, and the world was a roseate and wondrous thing.

Uncle Vic whirled by, a dark-haired dowager in his arms. He winked at Harold broadly. The lights grew soft, warm. Time tiptoed from the room—

Suddenly the ringing of the phone stabbed through the stereo-throb of the music. "Excuse me," Priscilla said, slipping from his arms and going into the hall. She appeared a moment later in the doorway, the receiver in her hand. "It's for you," she said.

He took the receiver from her and raised it to his ear. "Hello?"

"Harold?" It was Gloria's voice. "Are you all right, Harold?"

He was annoyed. "Of course I'm all right," he said gruffly. "Why shouldn't I be?"

"Be—because they found out about us—the coven-sisters, I mean. Tonight when I went to witch-class the head-instructress told me I was through and that I'd get my come-uppance before midnight."

"Nonsense, Gloria! You've let this obsession of yours get the best of you."

"But it's not an obsession, it's real. Oh, Harold, I'm so scared!"

She was almost hysterical. Slowly his annoyance gave way before a mental picture of her sitting forlornly in her little living room, her blue eyes dark with terror. "All right," he said abruptly, "I'll come over for a while. Pull yourself together."

He hung up. Priscilla was standing in the living-room doorway, looking at him oddly. "You-

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'll have to excuse me for an hour or so," he said. "Something's come up."

"But doll, I was just going to start the games. At least stay long enough to help us pin the tail on the—the donkey."

"I'm sorry, Pris—I can't."

She came very close to him and playfully gripped his lapels. "I won't let you go unless you promise to come back."

"All right," he said. "I promise."

HE took a cab, hoping to save time, but a traffic jam thwarted him and it was a full forty minutes later when he climbed the three flights of stairs to Gloria's walk-up. When she failed to answer his knock he pushed the door open and stepped inside. He found her in the little living room, huddled on the mohair sofa, her shoulders shaking. On the floor at her feet lay her black cat, its three legs jutting grotesquely from its lifeless body.

He went over and sat down beside her and put his arms around her. Slowly her shoulders quieted. "She—she dropped dead about ten minutes ago," she said. "Oh why did they have to pick on her —*why?*"

Tears ran down her cheeks, and she pressed her face against his lapel. He saw the way it was with her now; now he understood. Young men like himself, laughing at her, treating her like a child when she wanted to be treated like a woman; buying her candy when she craved flowers. No wonder she had wanted to become a witch—and, conversely, no wonder she hadn't been able to become one. "How did they find out about us, Gloria?" he asked gently.

"The coven-sister who nominated you Victim of the Year learned that you had magic money in your possession—a witch can spot it right away—and told the head instructress. The head instructress was furious. She—she lined all of us up along the wall and threatened to torture us till one of us confessed, and I didn't want to see the other girls suffer so I said I was the one. What made it worse was that I've been sneaking into the coven-library when no one was there and reading forbidden books. That's how I was able to energize the chlorophyll and induce the chromatolysis-effect that—"

His voice was cold. "Who is this coven-sister, Gloria?"

"I—I don't know. I've never seen any of them. An apprentice witch isn't permitted in their presence. But she must be someone you're acquainted with."

He stood up. "Never mind. *I* know who she is. I have to go now, Gloria, but I promise I'll be back."

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OLD Mother Hubbard's door was closed. He pounded on it peremptorily. He pounded on it again. He tried the knob. It would not turn.

The gamy odor still permeated the hall. Probably, he thought bitterly, she had taken her unholy brew to the local Sabbat and was even now presiding over it with her gaunt unlovely sisters, the devil's deputy, in his woolly goat-robe, standing at her side. Well he would wait for her to return. He would sit on the stairs and wait till she came in the door and then he would tell her straight to her face what he thought of black-hearted old women who preyed on harmless girls and murdered crippled cats.

He got out his cigarettes, felt in his pocket for his matches. The folder was empty. There was another one in his dresser-drawer, he remembered, and he went upstairs to get it. Opening the drawer, he paused. On top of the dresser lay a crisp twenty-dollar bill. Beside it lay a sheet of yellow tablet-paper.

Wonderingly he picked the paper up. On it, the following words had been laboriously printed with a soft-lead pencil:

Every day when I clean your room I smell the canned soup you cook each night and morning and it is heavy on my heart that one so fine should suffer. Tonight I want to say, Harold, will you share with me the spaghetti with venison meat balls that I cook all afternoon on my stove, but you will not listen and you give me money and walk away. Now I give it back. Twenty dollars I will never need so much that good food someone cannot buy. I go now to St. Anthony's to say a prayer for you.

He stood there immobile for a long time, staring at the simple words. Hunger in a person's eyes did not always imply greed; sometimes it implied a need for understanding, a need to help; a need not to be alone.

At length he left the room and descended the stairs. The hall phone rang just as he was passing it. He took down the receiver. "Hello?"

"Hello," a man's voice answered. "I'd like to speak to Mr. Knowles."

"This is Mr. Knowles."

"This is Mr. Ackman. I hope you'll forgive me for having forgotten about our appointment this afternoon. Why I did, I don't know. Anyway, I just remembered it a moment ago—out of a clear blue sky, so to speak—so if you're still interested I'd like you to drop around tomorrow morning. I'm sure I can work something out for you."

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"I'll say I'm still interested!" Harold said. "And thank you for calling."

HE took a cab back to Forestview. Halfway there, the plan came to him, and he had the driver stop at an all-night drugstore. After buying a cake of soap, he climbed back into the cab. During the remainder of the ride he occupied himself by figuring out the details. It was a simple plan, and there weren't very many of them; but thinking of them kept his mind off the sickness in the pit of his stomach.

After the driver let him off in front of Priscilla's he waited till the cab disappeared around the corner, then he soaped all the windshields of the cars standing in the driveway and along the curb, and removed the valves from all the tires. When he was finished he walked half a block to an all-night service-station and made a phone call. Then he returned to Priscilla's.

The party was in full swing. Her eyes lit up when he walked in the door, and a few minutes later she brought in a cake from the kitchen and set it on a card-table in the middle of the living room. It was a big three-layer cake with orange frosting. In its center stood two tiny wax dolls, and around them, arranged in the shape of a pentagram, were thirty-one candles. A glimmering of the truth struck him then, and he peered at the dolls intently. One of them bore a faint resemblance to him; the other bore a faint resemblance to Gloria.

Still he found it hard to believe. Not Priscilla of the golden eyes, the golden hair; not Priscilla of the golden soul. He saw the big rectangular poster hanging on the wall then, and he had to believe. It was the pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey poster, and there were scores of tiny pinpricks in the painted animal's body. Only the animal wasn't a donkey, it was a cat—a three-legged black cat with half a tail. It had a whole tail now, though—

Not that it would need one any more.

Priscilla was lighting the candles, and everyone was standing around the card table, looking at him eagerly. Greedily. He noticed something then—something that his previous absorption with Priscilla had wiped from his awareness. The women outnumbered the men by a ratio of twelve to one.

The candle flames leaped up in little flickerings and presently, as the wax dolls began to melt, he felt the first faint prickling of the heat. Uncle Vic leaned toward him, his face thinner somehow, his nose more pointed. Priscilla, her task completed, leaned toward him also. Her face was thinner too, and her golden

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eyes had transmuted to a baleful yellow. Her lips were drawn back, revealing preternaturally pointed eyeteeth. It was a masquerade party after all, and the time for unmasking had come. He shuddered at the realization.

"But why, Priscilla?" he asked, fighting to control his horror. *"Why?"*

The yellow eyes incandesced. "You love me don't you? Well I'm returning your love in the only way I can. I'm returning it with hate—and I'm returning it in full-measure!"

HE drew back. The candle flames grew brighter, warmer. The first drops of sweat dampened his forehead. He held himself tight, listening with all his being. At last he heard the sound he was waiting for—the slamming of a car door. He relaxed then.

"What was that?" Uncle Vic asked sharply.

"The police, I imagine," Harold said. "I asked them to drop by."

"It can't be," Priscilla said shrilly. "Why, if you even mentioned the word 'Sabbat' they'd laugh at you!"

"I kind of thought they would—that's why I didn't mention it. I asked them to drop by for quite another reason. Wait'll you see what the kids have done to your cars."

She was staring at him. So was Uncle Vic. So were the others. "Our cars—" she began. Then, "Oh, you mean they soaped the windows and things like that." She laughed. "We'll simply refuse to prefer charges—won't we, Uncle Vic?"

Uncle Vic relaxed visibly. "Sure, that's what we'll do."

"Who," Harold said, wiping his forehead, "said anything about you preferring charges?" He confronted Priscilla. "Obviously you aren't familiar with Forestview's ordinances. The one I have in mind states that on the night of October thirty-first all private vehicles shall be kept in garages, either public or private, in order that 'our citizens of tomorrow will not be tempted to perform acts of a delinquent nature'. The local kids have been behaving so well for the past several years that the ordinance has been unofficially laid to rest, but I imagine that once the chief of police hears about your flagrant violation of it he'll be delighted to revive it."

Abruptly Uncle Vic blew out the candles. "You fool!" he said to Priscilla. "You utter fool!" His voice rose. "The old man will be furious. He'll strip us of our powers—everyone of us. I'll lose my vicariate! Why didn't you check on the ordinances? Why didn't—"

"Shut up, you old goat!" Priscilla screamed. "He's lying, don't

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you see? The police aren't out there! There's no one out there! He's lying, I tell you. He's—"

The doorbell rang.

It was nearing midnight when Harold got back to the city. But late though the hour was, there was still time to go trick-or-treating. First he would pick up Gloria, he decided, and then the two of them would go calling on Mrs. Pasquale. And if the old lady didn't come across with two plates of her spaghetti with venison meat-balls they would soap her windows but good.

THE END

☆ ☆ ☆

COMING NEXT MONTH

A scoop from out of the past!

The September FANTASTIC features a little-known science-fantasy novelet by **Erle Stanley Gardner.** Its title: *New Worlds.* It reveals a little-known side of the early work of the creator of Perry Mason.

The lead novelet is an unusual story, *Plane Jane,* about an unusual girl, by **Robert F. Young,** who, as you've just witnessed, is usually unusual.

And, in addition, other short stories and our regular features. Be sure to get the September FANTASTIC on sale at all newsstands August 21.

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(Continued from page 4)

don't seem to like his stories. This is the first of his controversial stories I've read, but if this is a good example of his talent, he is now ranked with my five favorite authors.

I've discussed this with the other members of the Massena SF Club and there are not many dissenters from this viewpoint. We think that you have done admirably in bringing this new talent into the light.

A story which ranks with this one by Bunch is the Leinster novelet. Science Fiction would be a dead thing if a few stories like this weren't injected occasionally re the tribute to Dan Galouye—I agree with that one 100%.

This letter is now being cut off because if I keep it up I'll probably wind up praising every young and old writer in the business.

Jim Gardner
5 Douglas Road
Massena, New York

● *Not a bad idea—praise, that is—there are so few of the devoted SF writers left.*

Dear Miss Goldsmith:

Your covers have shown a terrific improvement these last two months. Barr and Schelling are both great artists; use them, Emsh, and Schomberg and get rid of Birmingham and Summers. Oh, you can use Birmingham on interiors; he's shown in ANALOG that he can do those passably. But keep him off the covers.

Summers, on the other hand, should be axed entirely. He *can* draw; he showed that with his interiors for the April AMAZING. But on the stories with the best possibilities, he apparently just doesn't bother. His most glaring example of this is his illo for Karen Anderson's story in the May FANTASTIC; if that giraffe-necked thing is a hippogriff, then I'm a basilisk!

Your stories are generally good to excellent. I like the arrangement of novelets to shorts, with an occasional complete novel to break the pattern. I don't care for David Bunch at all; on the other hand, I miss Arthur Porges' appearance in FANTASTIC, where he fit so beautifully about a year ago. WE WANT MORE GREY MOUSER STORIES. At least one every 9 months, if not more often. Please?

Get more fantasies from Karen Anderson; she's good!

Fred Patten
5156 Chesley Ave.
Los Angeles 43, Calif.

● *A great Mouser story will appear quite soon—and a special one it is.*

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Dear Miss Goldsmith:

This is the second time that I have bought FANTASTIC (May, 1962 issue). I have now had my first taste of the writing of Mr. Bunch. I can't seem to understand what he has in mind, and I don't like him. It is possible that I might even like him less if I were able to understand him. I am praying for some enlightenment—soon.

Murray Leinster's novelet, "Planet of Dread", was terrific on the whole, but I thought the ending a trifle "weak."

Jack Sharkey's "Double or Nothing" was good, but at that rate of duplication, wouldn't the countryside be in some danger? Cornflakes . . . I don't like them, anyway.

I agree with Mr. Winkes in his tribute to Dan Galouye. I would enjoy seeing more stories like "A Silence of Wings."

Tom Goldman
12 Tulip Drive
Great Neck, N. Y.

● *Yes, as we understand it Mr. Sharkey did intimate that rate of duplication could be disastrous.*

Dear Editor:

Looking through the May issue of FANTASTIC, I have noticed an alarming drift in your policy. The majority of stories in that issue were Science Fiction, and thinking back this has been true for some time. I was under the impression that your sister magazine AMAZING took care of the Science Fiction (and a good job it does) while you concentrated mainly on fantasy, which is why I buy it.

If you find that worthwhile Fantasy stories are few and far between, why not print or reprint stories from the Howard, Burroughs, Leiber, Lovecraft, Derleth group, just to name a few. I'm sure no one would object to seeing reprints of Howard's, Burroughs and Lovecraft's Stories. The old timers in the Fantasy fan field would enjoy rereading them as they haven't been printed since the 1930's and early 40's and the newcomers and younger ones of the field would enjoy their first reading of them and clamour for more.

Don't get me wrong I have nothing against science fiction as I am a staunch fan of it myself, but, I enjoy fantasy better and would like to see more of it printed.

Lawrence D. Kafka
4418 Bruner Ave.
Bronx 66, N. Y.

● *More fantasy coming up, we promise.*

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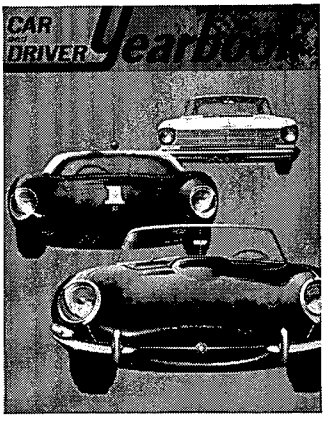

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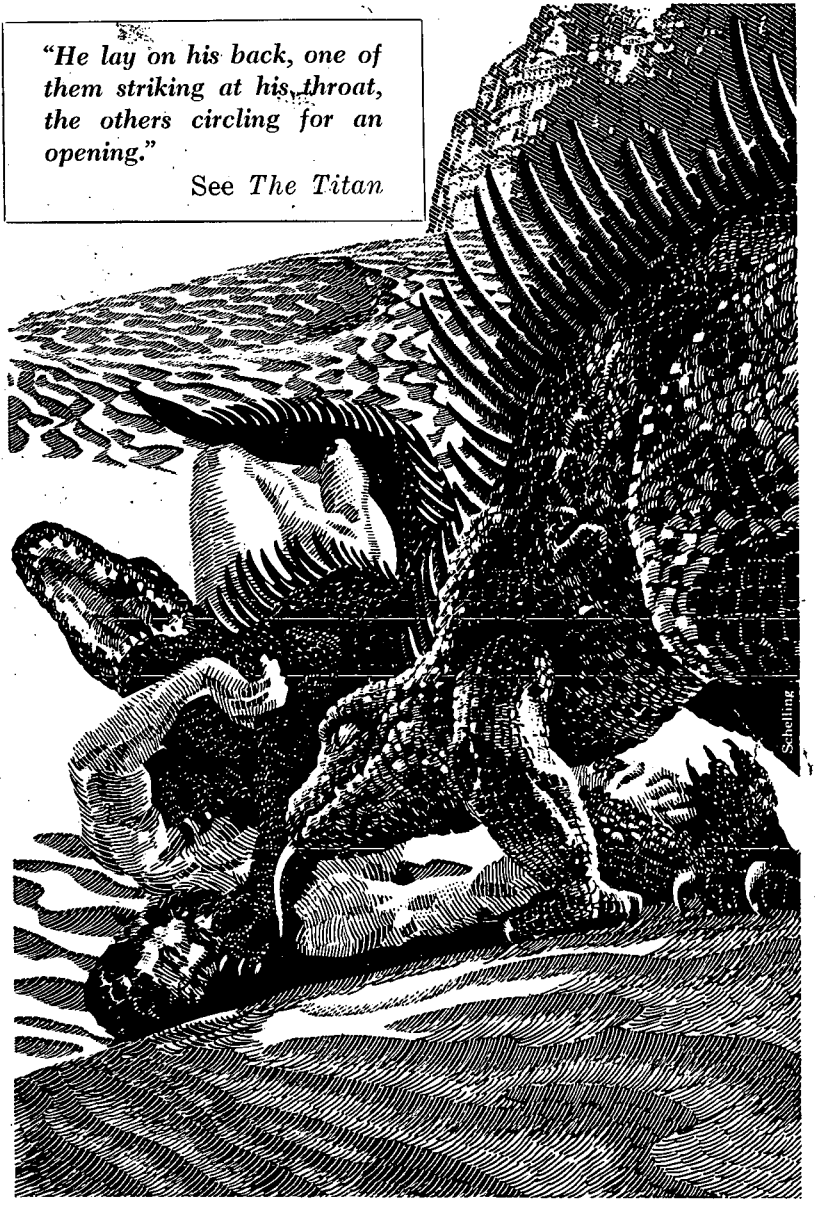
"He lay on his back, one of them striking at his throat, the others circling for an opening."

See *The Titan*



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